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TALKING A GOOD MATCH:

A CASE STUDY OF PLACEMENT MATCHING IN A SPECIALIST ADOLESCENT FOSTER CARE SCHEME

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Thesis presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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I declare that the contents of this thesis and the research on which it is based are entirely my own work.

17.5.01

ABSTRACT

The study addresses an important gap in the research, the nature of foster placement matching for adolescents. The study setting was an established, specialist adolescent fostering scheme in a large local authority social work department. Contextual data was collected by preliminary fieldwork and analysis of agency documents. Data was collected by observation and interview at the site of placement decision-making and this was analysed by a novel method which employed text-based, meaning-centred and simple quantitative analytical techniques. The enquiry centred on possible inconsistencies between the agency's aspiration for its matching practice and what actually took place in the decision-making. The practice was found to deviate from its intended goals in important ways and to leave placements open to risk of instability, breakdown and failing to meet childrens needs. The findings lend strong support to current developments in the field with regard to care planning, recording and monitoring. They also raise questions about the relationship between the care agency, as seeker and regulator of foster placement resources, and foster carers, as the providers, which have yet to be addressed in policy, practice or research. The study concludes with recommendations based on its findings.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

This doctoral study began with some aspirations it was ultimately unable to realise, some that it met simply by being completed and others which had to be recast several times as the project developed.

The setting for the study is a specialist foster scheme for adolescents (the AFS) based in a large local authority social work department where I was working and continued to work as a senior member of staff. Using a primarily interpretative paradigm, the study takes an in depth look at the process of placement matching for a sample of the adolescent girls who were registered with the AFS over the course of twelve months. This is set against a background of contextual data collected by fieldwork and analysis of agency documents. The data on matching decision making itself was collected by observation and interview at the decision-making site.

Studying the process of placement matching per se was not the original focus of the study. Its origins lay in a personal and professional concern with the treatment of adolescent girls in care and a curiosity as to why foster care seemed to be the placement of choice for them. Little is known for certain about teenage girls in care other than that there have tended to be fewer of them than teenage boys and their pathways into and through the care system differ in key respects from those of boys. When this study began and for many years previously, girls had consistently made up about forty per cent of the teenage population in the care of UK local authorities (Campbell, 1981; Warren, 1985a) and b); Packman, 1986; Cawson, 1987). There was a greater propensity for the girls to be admitted to care following referral to social services, juvenile courts or children's hearings where the boys were more likely to receive a home supervision order. The girls were more likely than their male counterparts to have been admitted with the voluntary

agreement of their parents but, when admitted compulsorily, it was more likely to be on grounds of neglect, abuse, or moral danger and less likely to be on offence grounds. After admission, the girls were more likely than the boys to be placed in foster care and the boys more likely to be placed in residential homes or schools (Cawson, *op.cit*; Warren, 1985b).

The differential treatment of boys and girls was, if acknowledged at all, traditionally argued away on the grounds that different phsyiologies inevitably lead to different psychological and emotional development in the two sexes which have to be addressed differently in care and corrective interventions (Konopka, 1966; Cowie et al, 1968). However, researchers taking a feminist view of the issue offered an alternative account. By examining the patterns of treatment more critically with fresh empirical evidence, they found a double standard to be operating in judicial and welfare decision making with respect to the adjudication of offences and assessment of need, on the one hand, and the determination of an appropriate disposal, on the other. Moreover, this was an internationally consistent phenomenon (*inter alia*, Smart, 1976; Casburn, 1979; Campbell, 1981; Hudson B, 1985a) and b) in Britain: Elzinga and Naber, 1985; Kersten, 1985; Feoli-Dedecker, 1985; Cipollini et al., 1985; Sanz and Anton; 1985 in other EEC countries: Chesney-Lind, 1973 and 1974; Figes, 1975; Adler, 1975; Datesman and Scarpitti , 1980 a) and b), in the USA). According to these authors, girls were being assessed and treated by different criteria than boys even where the circumstances and behaviour or offences were similar. Where a certain amount of anti-social behaviour in boys was tolerated as a regrettable but normal feature of their growing up, in girls it was read as symptomatic of psychological disturbance and maladjustment. Where boys required restraint in order to protect the community, girls required to be protected from themselves. Where sexuality was rarely made an issue in respect of boys, it was a focal point of interest in relation to girls. Summarising the characteristic official response to delinquent girls, Campbell (1981) comments that it is as if the girls are seen as "able to relate to others only from a horizontal position". A. Hudson (1987:6) makes a similar

observation of social work practice; "concern would escalate dramatically when there were anxieties around a girl's sexual behaviour ... where no such alarm was triggered by the sexual activity of boys".

The origin of the sex-based double standard was attributed to a systematic and ubiquitous institutional sexism which reflected the pervasive sexist ideology of society at large and other authors went on to make the same case in respect of social work as a profession (Wise, 1988; Hanmer and Statham, 1988; Nice, 1988; Dominelli and McLeod, 1990). As a result of this pervasive sexist ideology, the theory went, girls and women were made victims of fixed and pervasive assumptions about their very nature which falsified their real needs and aspirations.

The theory of institutional sexism was built primarily on analyses of decision making *outcomes* from which a sexist *quality* of decision making had been inferred. It focused on the demonstrably male domination of the institutions of welfare and justice and saw in this a structural and almost conspiratorial resistance to treating females as rational and diverse agents of their own actions. Gelsthorpe (1985), however found that this was an inadequate and over-blown explanation for the complex quality of decision making she observed at close quarters in the settings of a social work office, a police juvenile liaison bureau, and a magistrate court. While her findings confirmed the double standard, its sources were found to be very diverse and routed as much in the day to day exigencies and working assumptions of the setting as in any ideologies which the staff at any level of the organisation may have had "sexist or otherwise". Sexism in institutions, she argues, is mediated by institutional practices; not a discrete phenomenon, but

> "a mixture of personal views, professional policies and practices which are continually 'shaped' by the exigencies of practice and organisational constraints. Indeed, it is impossible to distinguish between professional ideology, organisational expedience and sentiment"
> (Gelsthorpe 1985: 33).

Any research which failed to take account of this fluid and intricate dynamic would therefore simply be confirming its own a priori assumptions and would fail to examine

the real nature of decision making in situ. The project of this study at the outset was precisely to examine the intricate nature of social work decision making about girls through observation of it taking place and detailed interview with those involved. The aim was to be able to give some account of how the mediation of sexist attitudes and beliefs by operational practicalities might occur such that sex-differentiated decision making was the result.

As I have noted, there appeared to be a strong preference for foster care for girls in care but it was not at all clear why this should be, even accepting the theory of institutional sexism. Whether there was a link between the choice of an intimate, caring domestic environment and traditional female stereotypes of the chaste and private home-maker and child-carer could only be speculated upon (Warren, 1985a) Perhaps there was a fundamental belief that girls in particular needed family socialisation in order to develop 'normally' and perhaps the explanation ran in quite other directions. There was simply no research evidence on which to form a sound judgement and, as Cawson (1987:45) observes,

> "It is very much harder to explain the reasons for placement differences from the research because so much of this is in the area of knowledge 'taken for granted'. No one ever feels the need to explain why girls are thought more suited to boarding out and less suited to institutional life."

The aim of the study as originally conceived was to investigate 'what everyone knows' about the value of foster care for adolescent girls in care and why such placements were deemed particularly appropriate for them. How did practitioners understand and conceptualise the needs that they were selecting foster placements to meet? Why was foster care selected for this particular child and what made the particular resource selected the most suitable for her? Did the practitioners believe that teenage boys and girls had qualitatively different needs or did they have other reasons for choosing different types of placement for them? What did they believe to be the particular benefits of foster care over other placement types? The study would attempt to analyse the extent to which the common stock of taken for granted knowledge from which these questions

could be said to be sexist. It would investigate the extent to which it seemed to be based on and perpetuate unreconstructed negative or restrictive stereotypes of femininity and would attempt to address the question of how, if at all, sexism worked in the choosing of a placement.

Accordingly, preliminary fieldwork was organised to collect contextual data within which to situate the qualities found in the decision-making data. However, the central research question on which all the others hung was why a particular placement resource was selected for a particular girl and it soon became evident that this question in itself misrepresented the nature of the decision making under study. That is, it assumes that resources were being selected in this individualised way and it was an assumption that was thrown into increasing doubt the more data that accumulated. Resolving the doubt, examining whether the practice did centre on the assessed needs of the individual or on quite other factors, became the focal point of the study. The issue of gender had reluctantly but necessarily to be marginalised in order that the study of the mechanics and method of the matching practice could be examined for itself.

Reorienting the research strategy was a somewhat tortuous process because it had to be done after most data had already been gathered. However, in the course of this, the method itself became a serious preoccupation for it had to be tailor-made for the analysis intended. The effort of design produced a strategy which took in simple quantitative procedures alongside hermeneutic ones and centred on an obvious, but perhaps under-valued, truth about social work as an activity. Social work with, about and for its clients and users is practised through language and predominantly through spoken, interactive language. Interactive language, or talk, is based on universal, culturally specific and context specific rules. These rules provide a route to examining how the matching talk was structured, what it is was being used for, how it was being used and what it was accomplishing. The method of analysis in this study may be of as much interest as its

findings, for it provided the means for examining how practitioners talked their way to a decision that a child and a placement resource were 'matched'.

The practice of matching is as under-researched as the treatment of girls in care and the very concept is surrounded by paradox. In the first place, matching is accorded the status of a vital ingredient in successful placement making yet there appears to be no professional or scholarly consensus on what it does or should consist of (Triseliotis, 1989). Secondly, it implies an almost bespoke choice of placement resource yet is practised in the context of such a scarcity of resources that choice is severely limited (Rowe, 1989). Working through these paradoxes, the study makes some uncomfortable and challenging discoveries about the nature of matching practice in one, typical specialist adolescent fostering scheme.

There has been a delay of some years between the collection of data and the reporting of findings. Much has changed in the world of public child care during that time, new legislation, new public enquiries with their recommendations, new practices and even some new theories. Placement matching, on the other hand, appears not to have attracted renewed attention although new and closely related procedures have grown up around it. The agency where the study took place is one of many to adopt the guidelines for care and placement planning developed by Bristol University on behalf of the Department of Health (Ward, 1996). Some of the literature on which the Department of Health guidelines are based is discussed in Chapter 2 of this study and it provided the framework for a theoretical model of best practice in matching against which to view the study findings. There are messages in these findings which have relevance to current developments despite the age of the data from which they arise.

The research strategy is described in some detail in Chapter 3 to show the turns it took in the course of its development and to set out the procedures applied in the analysis of study data. The study setting and sample are described, also in some detail, in Chapter 4. The findings themselves are discussed in Chapters 5 to 9, following the order of six waves of analysis that were made across the data. Each wave of analysis produced issues

for the next and these are brought to a close if not a resolution in Chapter 10 when discussing the implications of the findings and the study's conclusions.

Chapter 2.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND A THEORETICAL MODEL OF BEST PRACTICE FOR MATCHING

2.1. INTRODUCTION

The data for the study was collected between 1989 and 1991. Preparations were being made at the time in England and Wales to implement the Children Act 1989 and similar legislation was in the process of being prepared for Scotland. The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 was implemented partially in 1996 and fully in 1997. The study thus took place at a time of major change in public childcare when established practice was being re-examined and new practices initiated. Practitioners and their agencies were being encouraged to focus more closely on the effectiveness of their interventions and research was exposing the consequences of their failure to do this hitherto (see, for example, research review by the Department of Health,1991). The literature discussed in this chapter spans the period leading up to and into this dynamic period in order to appraise the knowledge available at the time on specialist teenage fostering and its placement matching and to clarify the issues which are taken forward in the course of the study. More recent literature will be considered in the concluding chapter of the thesis in relation to the general implications of the study's findings.

The chapter begins by reviewing the literature on the development and form of specialist teenage foster care and practice literature on placement matching (section 2.2). Section 2.3 clarifies the definition of matching used in the study and draws on wider childcare literature to delineate the features of an ideal-type model of matching for comparing with the study data. In concluding the chapter, the issues raised by the literature which gave direction to the present study are clarified.

2.2. The Development and form of Specialist Teenage Foster Care

The features of specialist foster care that distinguish it historically from mainstream or traditional foster care are principally these. It targets particular groups of clients, the aims and objectives for placement extend beyond the provision of basic nurturant care, children and resources are matched for placement, the carers are trained for and supported in carrying out placement objectives and tasks, and they usually receive a fee in addition to expenses for providing placements. It is these latter features which have earned it the alternative and increasingly more common title of 'professional' foster care. The way fostering has developed generally over the last ten years or so leads some to argue that there is now little foster care which has the provision of nurturant care as its only or primary objective and there is increasing debate about the merits and necessity of making all foster carers professional carers (see, for example, NFCA, 1996, Berridge, 1997, and for an international perspective on this, Colton and Williams, 1997). Agencies, in Scotland at least, are progressively extending fee schemes to a wider range of foster carers (Warren and Black, 1998) and when data was being collected for this study, the agency was preparing to make fee payments to all its carers. Traditionally, however, fees have largely been confined to specialist foster care schemes and teenagers have continued to be their predominant client group (Berridge, 1997).

Foster care specifically for teenagers now has an established place in the range of substitute care provision routinely made by local authorities for the children they look after. Its history is short, however, relative to that of foster care in general. Having begun in the form of modest-scale experimental projects in Scandinavia and North America, it was imported in the mid-1970s by Nancy Hazel and her colleagues in Kent (Hazel, 1981). They established an evaluated pilot project to demonstrate the potential in the British context of 'treatment' fostering for 'hard to place' adolescents and inspired developments in foster care which spread rapidly and in a variety of forms throughout the British Isles. The Kent Family Placement Project recruited and trained carers specifically for the age group concerned, paid them a fee based on local

commercial rates for part-time work and provided them with regular and consistent professional support. Placements were made on the basis of explicit agreements that set objectives for, among other things, improvements in a child's behaviour and social functioning. To prove its point, the scheme set out to target adolescents who had spent most of their childhood in care and who had become 'institutionalised', those whose behaviour was particularly challenging, and generally those who seemed the most difficult to maintain in foster families. The apparent success of placements was impressive (Yelloly, 1979) and, initially on the basis of small scale experimentation, foster care in other parts of Britain was opened up to the placement of adolescents hitherto considered to be unfosterable (Shaw and Hipgrave, 1983, 1988; Downes, 1988; Lowe1990).

In the first survey of the field, Shaw and Hipgrave (1983, *op.cit.*) estimated that between the mid-seventies and the early eighties, new specialist fostering schemes for adolescents, for children with disabilities, for assessment purposes and for young people on remand were being established at a rate of four to five a year. In their second survey five years later, the authors found that the rate of development had been increasing to around eight to nine new projects a year. The field continued to diversify and Hill *et al* (1993) noted that new specialist schemes of one kind or another were still appearing in the early nineties. Even with this diversification, teenagers were still the principle client group for specialist fostering schemes and Lowe (1990) found that half of all local authorities in the UK had a scheme to provide foster placements for adolescents alongside more traditional forms of fostering. Some of the large voluntary organisations, such as Barnados, the National Children's Home and the Children's Society, had also developed practice in this area.

The treatment element of specialist foster care for teenagers has been very variable as the field has developed. The Kent Special Family Placement Scheme was an example of what Shaw and Hipgrave (1983) have defined as 'pure' treatment fostering in which carers are assigned therapeutic tasks equivalent to those of professional social workers and related to the assessed behavioural or emotional problems of the placed

child. Children eligible for placement in such schemes, according to the definition, tend to be those who might otherwise be placed in residential schools largely as a consequence of delinquent or challenging behaviour on their part. Carers are specifically recruited and trained for the task, supported individually by specialist family placement professionals in addition to the child's social worker and paid a fee. Carers are carefully matched to referred children with a view to providing the best prospects for the treatment goals to be met. These goals are then reviewed and the child's progress evaluated at pre-planned intervals within specified placement duration.

A variant of this which Shaw and Hipgrave (1983, *op.cit.*) found to be more common by the early eighties they defined as 'treatment orientated' fostering. This form is less narrow in the range of children eligible for referral and places less emphasis on purely therapeutic placement objectives. Referrals include teenagers for whom any form of institutional care might be the only alternative and those for whom foster placement provides a bridge between institutional care and the community. Placements in treatment orientated fostering schemes are based on an assessment of the child's developmental needs and matched "as far as possible with the appropriate foster parent" (*ibid.*; 28). Carers are also fee-paid and receive pre-and in-service training; they may also receive support from family placement specialists. Placement objectives concern adaptive, developmental change for the child and reviews take place at regular intervals but the duration of the placements tends to be more loosely defined than with pure treatment fostering schemes. Treatment orientated fostering rather than its pure form seems to have become the dominant model for subsequent development in the field and broadly describes the scheme in which the present study took place.

2.2.1 Costs, savings and the mechanisms of the 'market'

The circumstances that prevailed in the care system when foster care for teenagers was introduced in specialist form were favourable to its development in a number of respects. Progressively over the preceeding years, teenagers had come to dominate

the population of children in public care. Parker (1978) noted that, by 1976, there were more children in care who were over school-leaving age than there were under school age and that the mean age of children in care had risen to somewhere in the mid-teens. The exposure of drift and indecision in the social work management of children's care careers (Rowe and Lambert, 1973) had focused professional minds on the needs of the youngest children and on the task of ensuring for them a settled future outside the care system. If these children could not be restored to their families within a matter of months then adoptive families were sought for them and their stay in care was limited to the shortest possible. The 'permanency movement', as it is often referred to, combined with a falling birth rate led to a concentration of school-age children, and particularly older school-age children, in the physical care of the agencies (Parker 1978, 1988; Aldgate *et al.* 1989).

The apparently successful application of task-centred, time-limited social work intervention in the permanency movement may also have given other practitioners a taste for this kind of approach. It was, in any event, one of the essential features of the Kent Adolescent Placement Scheme which turned the spotlight on teenagers who had grown up in care, were usually housed in large institutions, were estranged from their own families and were ill-prepared for life when care came to an end (Hazel, 1981). These young people were not only in difficulties themselves, they also presented a problem for the care agencies. Residential care made substantial demands on decreasing local authority budgets and professional distaste for large institutions was mounting. Teenagers were not obvious candidates for the type of nurturant substitute families that foster care had traditionally provided for younger children. Their behaviour was often challenging, even delinquent, and their needs more complex and sophisticated. The Kent scheme explicitly and successfully challenged the assumption that teenagers *could not* be fostered and thus removed one of the ideological obstacles to a fruitful change of direction. It also offered a possible, and possibly cheaper, solution to the costly encumbrance of large scale residential care.

upon a process of closure and contraction of their residential establishments. Substantial financial savings were made because only a portion of the resources thus released were transferred to foster care. The widespread assumption that good foster care is, could or should be cheaper than residential care was fuelled by some of the assertions emanating from the Kent scheme. The project report of 1979, for instance, states,

> "Residential care is clearly very much more expensive than any kind of foster care. Project fostering probably costs about half the price of a residential place for a 'high problem' adolescent." (Hazel and Cox, 1979;.34)

The notion was further encouraged by comparisons such as that by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accounting which calculated that in 1986, local authorities would spend on average about six times more on a residential placement than on a foster placement (C.I.P.F.A., 1986).

These calculations did not include the cost of mainstream education, placement support and carer recruitment and training, and did not distinguish between different types of residential or foster care. Evidence subsequently emerged that the financial savings to care agencies were probably made at the cost of under-resourcing foster care and under-estimating what is involved in providing good quality foster care that meets the needs of the children it is intended for (NFCA, 1997; Berridge, 1997). Some writers have argued that, when all relevant expenses are taken into account, placements in well-organised and supported specialist foster schemes are probably just as expensive as residential placements (Knapp and Robertson, 1989; Berridge1997).

The Kent and C.I.P.F.A cost comparisons failed also to acknowledge the very different mechanisms of supply in residential and foster care and the implications this may have for the quality of care each can be relied upon to provide. Where residential care is provided by employed staff in their workplace, foster care is provided by self-employed individuals and couples in their own homes. Where residential care is provided chiefly by the state in establishments run by local authorities, foster care is almost exclusively a private sector provision. Indeed, one might say it is a singularly private provision in that it is the otherwise private lives of the providers which are

opened up to strangers' children, and the raft of regulations, professionals and, increasingly, the relatives which accompany them. Caring for other people's children impacts more directly and intrusively on foster carers than on residential carers and the arrangement is all the more delicate and complex for this reason. Furthermore, if and when the carers decide for any reason that they are unable to continue providing it is the child who moves not, as in residential care, the worker (Scottish Office, 1992) and the resource is lost in its entirety. It is in the nature of foster care provision that it has to be continually generated and replenished. Its supply, unlike that of residential care, is unpredictable, intermittent and therefore somewhat precarious. The expenses of recruiting, retaining, replacing, training and supporting carers, of managing and supporting placements, and of making alternative arrangements for the child when a placement is prematurely ended are all part of the real cost of foster care and the activities themselves part of the framework within which foster care is supplied and used. A further characteristic that can be added to this framework is that foster care is not a stand-alone provision. As Cliffe (1991), Berridge (1987) and Parker (1988) have all observed, when foster placements fail most of the children concerned move to residential placements, for a period at least, and local authorities which have tried to replace residential care completely with foster care have ultimately failed to do so (Cliffe and Berridge, 1991). Foster care needs another, less precarious supply of care placements to back it up.

2.2.2. Consolidation and dilemmas

The period from the mid-eighties to the turn of the decade is seen by some scholars of specialist fostering as its period of consolidation. (Shaw and Hipgrave 1989b; Aldgate et el. 1989; Hill *et al.* 1992). The one time innovative practices of placement contracts, specialist family placement workers and carer training had become standard, if not universal, practice. As the schemes had matured and as the carers and professionals gained in experience, their standing in and influence on the wider field of child care also increased to extent that some schemes acquired an elite status in their agencies. (Shaw and Hipgrave, 1989a). While some aspects of the early teenage fostering schemes had evolved into established practice wisdom, however, there were

other aspects that had changed dramatically and development was not without its accompanying tensions and losses.

The first major change over the course of its development was the broadening of referral criteria. Having cleared the backlog of teenagers who had drifted through residential care, the schemes made themselves available to children entering care in their teenage years after previous episodes at a much younger age or for the first time. In some cases the age-limit was also lowered. Respondents to Shaw and Hipgrave's 1988 questionnaire survey listed an extensive array of categories of child for whom the schemes were now catering - those who were 'anti-social', 'out of control', 'emotionally disturbed', who had been physically or sexually abused, bereaved, or whose families were in crisis. Even these categories appeared to be being used very flexibly as eligibility criteria, and the researchers conclude,

> "Categories are not so much being extended as dissolved, so that many schemes are now open to virtually any young person not already in a family placement" (Shaw and Hipgrave, 1989b; 17)

Objectives for placement broadened accordingly and this was at the cost, the respondents indicated, of some precision in planning and implementation. The researchers concluded that while setting time limits for a placement had never been an exact science it had now fallen into complete disarray. While some schemes felt able to use flexible time-limits in a purposeful way linked to placement objectives, there were also many instances where they were either set merely for "organisational neatness" or not at all (*ibid;*19). The implication from these findings is that, ironically, the practice of specialist fostering was in danger of drifting back into the 'wait and see' approach that its initial emphasis on task-centred, time-limited intervention was specifically designed to counteract.

A second area of tension had arisen because the expansion and diversification had not been accompanied by a commensurate increase in specialist staff (Shaw and Hipgrave, 1989b; NFCA/Lowe, 1990). Simultaneously, schemes had run into difficulties recruiting carers of an appropriate calibre and the supply of resources had not kept

pace with demand. Bebbington and Miles (1990) found that foster care resources generally were most available in locations where they were least needed and extremely scarce where levels of need were high. Scarcity of resources specifically for teenagers was both more acute and more generalised (Lowe,1990 *op.cit*) with a very direct consequence for placement choice and matching. Aldgate *et al* (1989) have suggested that choice of placement was increasingly being driven by the availability of resources rather than the particular needs of the child and that placements were being made on the basis of there seeming to be no alternative rather than as a positive, planned process.

Thirdly, a variety of tensions were developing in relation to the tasks and preferential status of professional carers in the schemes. On the one hand, responses to Shaw and Hipgrave's 1988 survey were suggesting that the preferential status of professional carers was more apparent than real. The level of fees had fallen behind rates of pay in the commercial sector and some carers were finding it necessary to seek additional part-time work. An increased level of allegations and complaints by children against carers seems to have caught the care agencies by surprise and some respondents recorded concern that the way these were being dealt with by the agencies was insufficiently respectful of the position carers were in. Some expressed the view that the rhetoric of partnership between the agencies and their contracted carers was hollow. On the other hand, the distinction between specialist and mainstream fostering was blurring such that the reason for different pay and conditions was no longer as clear cut as it had been. With greater emphasis on supporting children in their own homes and reducing the time they spent in care, the children who were being admitted to care and placed in foster homes were perceived to be increasingly more disturbed and difficult to handle. The increasing emphasis on maintaining family links for the children was not without its challenges for carers either. Carers in every form of fostering were faced with foster children with a wider and more complex range of problems including the continuing, and often acrimonious, relationships they had with members of their own families. (Berridge, 1997). Some of Shaw and Hipgrave's respondents reported tensions between professional and non-fee paid carers in their

agencies arising from the perception that preferential status for the former was unjustified. Nevertheless, Rowe *et al.* (1989) found that children referred to specialist schemes were generally more disturbed than those mainstream placements. This suggests that there remained some significant differences and others of Shaw and Hipgrave's respondents observed that there was a conflict between the sophisticated expectations of specialist carers with their accompanying impact on the carer families and the requirement that these families provide teenagers with a 'normal family life'.

Finally, it had become clear that specialist adolescent fostering was not only difficult to resource but placements were also difficult to maintain. Berridge and Cleaver's (1987) study of placement breakdown in the first year of placement uses the category 'intermediate' in preference to 'specialist' fostering but is essentially dealing with the same area of practice. They found that intermediate placements in general tended to fair better than mainstream long-term placements with average breakdown rates in their first year of twenty-one per cent and thirty-five per cent respectively. The authors attribute this generally favourable performance to the better status, preparation and training of carers typical of intermediate schemes and the more consistent support of placements. However, these factors seem to have benefited teenage placements less than others (those for children with disabilities, for instance) for thirty-two per cent of their teenage sample broke down within six or nine months of the placement starting. Moreover, these placements tended to break down in situations of crisis with alternative, ad hoc plans having to be hurriedly implemented. Fenyo *et al* (1989) report a thirty-eight per cent breakdown rate in the Kent Scheme's placements during the late eighties and Rowe *et al* (1989) found that more than half of the specialist teenage foster placements they studied failed to last as long as planned and forty-seven per cent failed to last as long as needed. The earlier successes of the schemes, it seemed, had not altogether survived their expansion and consolidation.

2.2.3. Summary of development and form

The situation in specialist adolescent fostering when data collection began for this study was a mixed and slightly unsettled one. On the one hand, the field had expanded to provide for a wide range of adolescents and had introduced better standards of practice into foster care. Notwithstanding the difficulties of maintaining placements for this difficult client group, a significant proportion of placements seemed to survive as long as they were needed and, even when they did not, social workers regarded them to have benefited the child to some extent (Rowe *et al.*, 1989).

On the other hand, the field seemed to have lost some clarity of purpose and was bedevilled by resource issues. It is perhaps inevitable that it should have lost some of its impetus and optimism once it ceased to be a ground breaking experiment fuelled by enthusiasm and became a more routine provision among others in the care system. The problems of resource supply and quality were more fundamental. The very existence of the provision depends upon the willingness of ordinary, private families to give up their privacy and become providers of care in their own homes for other people's children. This willingness can be courted by recruitment and reinforced by training but it cannot be guaranteed or controlled.

2.3. Placement Matching in specialist Teenage Fostering

As we have seen, the scarcity of specialist placement resources seriously limited the ability of practitioners to select and match placements with the sophistication they might wish. Nonetheless, there is no evidence that the practice generally discontinued. Rather the implication is that matching continued to be attempted even though it might be constrained by the circumstances and this was certainly the case in the study setting.

Yet the literature that might help to explain precisely what was being attempted and how, under these or even the more favourable circumstances of earlier times, is extremely scant. Shaw and Hipgrave (1983) place matching in a procedural continuum which begins with the approval of carers and the acceptance of referrals

and proceeds through general preparation processes for carers and children, individual placement matching and placement introductions. Matching, they suggest, could be seen as a process of "eliminating crude incompatibilities", generating hypotheses about the compatibility between a particular child and a particular resource and then informally testing these in a staged process of introductions between the child, ideally the family of origin and the prospective carers. They observe, however, that there is no reliable data on precisely how the practice of matching is conducted across the field of specialist fostering and in what ways it contributes to placement success. There is a lack of empirical evidence and a theoretical base to relate it to, which leaves practitioners having to effectively make it up as they go along.

> "Foster care literature has long stressed the importance of careful matching, though the key questions of what and how never seem to have been answered clearly enough to offer practical guidelines for practitioners" (Shaw & Hipgrave 1983;.92)

The situation seems to have improved little since Shaw and Hipgrave's initial survey of the field. Of the twenty-three sub-headings under which Shaw (1994) lists his four hundred and sixteen literature references on aspects of fostering, none relates to placement selection and matching. Triseliotis (1989; 15) observed in his review of research on foster placement outcomes that matching is wholly under-researched, poorly informed as a practice and "possibly one of the most vital missing links in achieving more successful placements". In his review of foster care literature eight years later, Berridge (1997) finds little more to offer on the subject save a general finding that same-race matching seems to be important to a successful foster placement outcome, and a reference to one study which found that the objectives of placements were often incongruent with the criteria for which the carers had originally been assessed (Scottish Office, 1988). "Regrettably", he solemnly remarks, "the research evidence on [placement matching] is far from reassuring" (Berridge *op.cit*; 21).

Some models of matching for older children can be found in a small number of published project descriptions. Fitzgerald, (1982) describes the matching procedures used in the St.Luke's Project, a residential and family placement facility for school age children in care run by the Children's Society. Edwards (1986) surveys matching

practice in a small number of Barnado's and local authority family placement projects for 'hard to place' children and Hunter (1989) tackles the subject briefly in his account of aspects of practice in the same Barnado's projects. Hazel and Cox (1975-1979) and Hazel (1980 & 1981) describe the Kent placement scheme.

As a group, the projects described by these authors span a wide range of specialist family placement schemes. Hunter's collection (1989, *op.cit.*) includes a project for disabled children as well as projects for children placed from residential school and those placed on the basis of treatment-style contracts. Fitzgerald's scheme was more concerned with long-term, quasi and official adoption placements but shorter-term placements were sometimes made in preparation for adoption and for older children as a bridge between the residential home and independent living. There were often therapeutic goals attached to the objectives of these placements. Accounts of the Kent scheme by Hazel and Cox (*op.cit.*) appear to provide the only comprehensive accounts in the public domain of not only treatment fostering but also of specialist teenage fostering managed by a local authority, albeit as a semi-autonomous enterprise.

The writers in this small collection all give matching a key role in family placement making. Hunter, for example, refers to it as "the crucial process in a successful placement" ((1989, *op.cit*; 67) Their accounts of practice, however, provide only a subjective, partial and fragmentary picture of what it actually entailed. It seems to have been the general assumption that placement matching for older children and particularly for time-limited placements with strategic or therapeutic aims had necessarily to depart from the methods developed for adoptive and long-term foster placements of very young children. This had emphasised the placing of children in family structures, lifestyles and settings where they appeared naturally to fit in terms of their age, development, personality, intelligence and interests (see, for example, Maluccio *et al.* 1986). Shaw and Hipgrave (1983) have observed that specialist fostering was generally challenging much of the conventional wisdom of traditional fostering, including conventions of placement matching. However, there is little clarity

in the literature on what was replacing the conventional wisdom and practice as we shall see from a closer examination of how matching was described in the project accounts. Three dimensions of the practice are considered; its setting, the decision makers and the criteria and content of discussions.

2.3.1. The setting

In a minority of the schemes surveyed by Edwards (1986), matching decisions were made fairly informally by the child's social worker, the family placement or project worker and possibly also the prospective carers. A preferred method seems to have been a more formal team or panel meeting or case conference. The project Fitzgerald (1982) describes used a case conference to make the final decision about the appropriateness of a particular resource for a child but this took place only after a series of meetings between the project team and the child's social worker, on the one hand, and the prospective carers and their worker, on the other. In the Kent scheme, the final decision about a placement was made at a project team meeting after a series of consultations with people, including the child's family, associated with the child's case (Hazel, 1981).

The Barnado's schemes described by Hunter (1989) generally began 'informal matching' during the process of assessing carers for approval; that is, as they learnt more about prospective carers they began to have particular referred children in mind. Subsequently, most of the projects held informal gatherings at which carers waiting approval met with children waiting for placements under the supervision of project staff. At some point the project team would meet to discuss potential matches and would in some cases involve carers in this. In one project Hunter refers to the team apparently decided upon two or more possibilities which the child was then given to choose between but this seems to have been a unique formula in the agency.

2.3.2. The decision makers

Project workers in the Kent scheme were responsible for consulting with the child, the child's family of origin, and the child's social worker prior to matching by the project team (Hazel & Cox, 1975-79). In parallel with this process was another involving the

team apparently decided upon two or more possibilities which the child was then given to choose between but this seems to have been a unique formula in the agency.

2.3.2. The decision makers

Project workers in the Kent scheme were responsible for consulting with the child, the child's family of origin, and the child's social worker prior to matching by the project team (Hazel & Cox, 1975-79). In parallel with this process was another involving the carers who appeared to have had considerable influence on the decision as to which child would be placed with which carer family. The project literature emphasises the importance of the ongoing groups run for new and established carers. The groups were designed, among other things, to enable new carers to discover for themselves whether or not they felt suited to the work of treatment fostering and the kinds of children and problems they felt best equipped to deal with. They would then complete a form that specified the kind of child they preferred to foster and the form would be used by project workers to make a selection from referrals. "This step", Hazel writes, " will depend on the [foster] family's feeling ready to proceed and on the availability of a suitable match" (Hazel 1981;56). It seems clear that what is meant by 'match' in this instance is a child who fits the criteria laid down by the prospective carers.

The preference of prospective carers also appears to have played a major part in the practice described by Hunter (1989, *op.cit*). In some projects the carers were given photographs and biographies of referred children before meeting them at informal gatherings where they were encouraged to mingle and explore who amongst the children they most readily 'attached' to. This link would then be followed up more privately between the carers, their project worker and the child's social worker. The range of methods used in the Barnado's projects is only fleetingly referred to by Hunter but the centrality of carers' preference and opinion is revealed in his summary comments. Placement selection was a continuous process, he explains, of "helping families decide which child they could accept into their homes" and " the principle of self-selection and ownership of decisions [by carers] is clearly important ... at the matching stages as well as during the recruitment and assessment processes" (*ibid*: 74)

Hunter also extends the principle of decision ownership to the child but with the caveat that 'burdening' the child with the decision must be avoided. He presents the nature of the potential burden very dramatically thus,

> "an ... area for caution lies in the known dangers of burdening children with major decisions which they cannot handle; the enormous responsibility attached to choosing one's own family must be viewed as terrifying and potentially very damaging for anyone, and certainly for an emotionally vulnerable young person" (*ibid*;70)

This warning makes no distinction between younger and older school age children, for whom the 'burden' of the decision might be experienced very differently, nor between adoption and less permanent placement where again the issues are rather different. Furthermore, its tone sits uncomfortably with other literature of the time and earlier that highlights the importance of involving especially older children in the decisions which affect their lives and stresses the dangers of *not* doing so (Stein and Ellis, 1976; Page and Clark, 1977; Kahan, 1979; Festinger, 1983; Stein and Carey, 1986, Aldgate *et al*, 1989). Nevertheless, Hunter appears not to be out of step with the authors of the other project accounts discussed here for there is little evidence in any of them that the views and preferences of the child in the choice of resource were a major consideration. It seems that beyond agreeing to a family placement of some kind, more refined judgement about which family remained the prerogative of professionals and, in many cases, prospective carers.

Fitzgerald (1982, *op.cit*) describes a process of placement selection which aimed very emphatically to centre on the assessed placement needs of the child and only after these were clarified, and the child's general desire for a family placement ascertained, was a search made for an appropriate placement. Unlike the other projects described, the project did not maintain a pool of prospective carers from which selection was made but rather relied on resource finding by the agency's field workers when the need arose. The case conference for matching included the child's social worker and his or her manager, other professionals involved with the child and the entire project team. The prospective carers appear not to have been involved at this point although

it is not absolutely clear in the account. The emphasis in Fitzgerald's project was placed on the project team's role as moderator and arbiter in the complex decision about whether or not a match between resource and child was good enough to proceed. It could "act as a modifying influence to prevent an inappropriate placement" in circumstances where resources were scarce and there was pressure to place the child. Sometimes, he explains, the team were criticised by other agencies for being too selective in their search for resources **but** "we argued that the object was to do everything possible to select the right placement for each child in our care" (*ibid.*; 83-84). Fitzgerald is the only author of the group to even suggest a potential conflict of interest in matching, in this instance between the pressure to place a child and the pressure to secure the *right* placement. The others seem to see consensus over the decision, at least between the professionals and the carers, as entirely unproblematic.

2.3.3. The criteria and content of discussion

Hunter (1989; 67) reveals little of the criteria for and content of placement matching in the Barnado's projects beyond that of the mutual attraction that may manifest in the behaviour of carers and children at the informal meetings and or by the parties "stating an initial commitment to formal introductions". Meanwhile, the project workers were also forming judgements and Hunter observes that most carers both expected and appreciated professional guidance in their choice. Without clarifying the substance of this guidance or how professional judgements were made, he closes the subject with the enigmatic conclusion that,

> "although feel and intuition will (and perhaps should) never be discarded as assessment tools, isolating specific behaviours to note as evidence of mutual attraction is a helpful move away from reliance on abstract notions alone" (*ibid*; 69)

Hazel and Cox (1979) are a little more forthcoming on the content of matching discussion in the Kent scheme. In what they pointedly frame as a radical departure from traditional matching practice, the method involves pairing the assessed problems and known interests of the child with the assessed 'assets' of a carer family with a view to making placements in which " the assets could be used to the best advantage to reduce the problems" (*ibid*; 9.) No attempt was made to match like with like on the characteristics of social class and intelligence nor to fit the foster child

into a naturalistic age structure of parents and offspring. Indeed, the authors argue that there are many advantages to placing children of the same age as the carers' own in terms of integrating the foster child into the community and local peer groups. They do, however, note that placements are likely to fail if the two sets of children do not get on and assessing the likely impact on the carer family of introducing a particular foster child is part of the discussion which precedes a placement decision. The location of the placement is mentioned as a topic related to the ideal of placing a child near to their home area unless this is specifically contra-indicated. The personalities of the parties were also considered although, they write, "we were not clear about the criteria we used" (*ibid.*; 9). Hazel (1980) offers a selection of case examples to show which assets and problems were paired in particular instances but as to how the judgement was made about the benefits of such pairing Hazel can only explain that in some cases, the decision was made by "a flash of insight" and in others by "eliminating all the possibilities but one" (*ibid*; 56). Intuition seems to have played a large part in this decision making as it did in that of the Barnado's projects.

Fitzgerald (1983; 71-72) gives the most detailed account of matching practise in any of the project accounts and also the most comprehensive account of the agenda of discussion at matching meetings. At St Luke's, the term 'selection' was preferred to 'matching' on the basis that

> "Matching tends to suggest that it is possible to link older children with families who have identical physical and psychological characteristics. This, in our view, is neither possible nor appropriate. We found the term 'selection' more appropriate to describe a process which considered carefully many factors in the child and the substitute family, but in search of compatibility rather than similarity".

The case conference to select the placement followed a routine that began with a review of the child's progress and 'emotional readiness' for a family placement. A report on the resource was then discussed which covered the carers' understanding of and sensitivity to the child's experiences and problems, their willingness and ability to work closely with the referring agency, their expectations of the child, lifestyle, interests, family roles and emotional responses to each other, and the availability in

the carers' locality of suitable schooling or any special services required for the child. These topics were discussed at length, Fitzgerald implies, is an exacting process of examination in which,

> "Each query would be fully explored so that every conceivable problem could be considered. The object was to enable doubts and difficulties to be expressed, not hidden or overlooked, and only when the conference was in agreement with the recommendation would the next step be taken" (*ibid*; .81)

2.3.4. Summary of practice literature

The models of matching arising from the literature suggest little that could be taken to be typical of the practice in specialist teenager fostering at the time. Rather, in the absence of a common theoretical base, each scheme seems to have struck a different set of emphases in its attempt to address the particular issues of matching for older children. There were, nevertheless, three broadly common characteristics; the attempt to insert some degree of objectivity and formality into the process by 'committee' decision making; the influential involvement of potential carers in the choice of whom to place where; and the marginal role in proceedings of the child and his or her family. These three characteristics also pertained to the practice researched for this study and their problematic reflection in the data made of them an important focus in data analysis.

In the scheme described by Fitzgerald (1983), the matching meeting was seen as providing a forum that, among other things, could be used to mitigate the pressures on the social worker to accept a resource which was not as suitable as it should be. This study also discovered that sustaining a focus on the child's placement needs in matching was far from automatic or straightforward.

Where the criteria for matching placements is concerned, the schemes seem to have very disparate ideas about what it was important to consider and the range of possibilities they present is set out in figure 1 below. Any, all or none of these might have been found in the study data.

Figure 1. Possible considerations in the process of matching placements

Mutual attraction between child and potential carers.
Child's problems and interests, carers' assets.
The likely impact on the carer family of introducing a particular foster child.
Location of resource.
Personalities of foster child and members of potential carer family.
Child's progress and 'emotional readiness' for a family placement.
Carers' understanding of and sensitivity to the child's experiences and problems.
Carers' willingness and ability to work closely with the referring agency.
Carers' expectations of the child.
Carer family's lifestyle, interests, family roles and emotional responses to each other.
Availability in the carers' locality of suitable schooling or any special services required for the child.

Clearly, deciding whether a potential placement is matched to the child's needs is to some extent a speculative exercise because it concerns the child's future welfare. It involves, as many decisions do in childcare, calculated risk. As Fitzgerald (1983; 79) puts it,

> "Every new family placement involves risk, and sometimes even major risks are justified. What has to be avoided is failure to recognise risks through lack of detailed and accurate information about the child and the prospective family, or failure to appreciate the significance of certain factors or combination of factors."

What the practice literature fails to explicate is precisely how practitioners might or do recognise placement risks and benefits and what factors they should or do take to be significant in making their decisions about whether or not a placement is matched.

An even more fundamental problem arising from the practice literature is the definition and function of matching. In some instances, it involved consideration of several placement resources and in others consideration of only one. The term 'matching' has been applied to both assessment from first principles of the quality of resource needed and also to the quite different process of finally verifying that an apparently suitable pairing of resource and referral will make a suitable placement. The issue is further complicated by the significance given to carer preferences in the projects described as against the marginalisation of the child and family. A case study of matching practice therefore faces the difficulty of having no apparent norms to which its findings can be related. The problem of a stable definition for the meaning and function of matching in practice was resolved for this study in the form of an

ideal-type model embodying certain presumptions about the functions that it could realistically perform. It is to the nature of that model that we now turn.

2.4. A Theoretical Model of Best Practice for Matching

The theoretical model of matching developed for the study draws on the literature on childcare decision making where some clear indications can be found of what should be done and what avoided when making foster placements. By confining the frame of reference to literature extant at the time of the practice studied, the resultant model represents the tenets of best practice contemporary with that practice. Three dimensions of the model will be described; its principles and structure, implementing the framework, and the components of the model agenda of discussion and decision making.

2.4.1. The essential principles and structure of the model

The very first principle of the model is that it is child-centred. That is, its purpose is to serve the individual needs and interests of the child to be placed and its practice is dedicated to this end. To achieve this standard, the practice must take account of prevailing resource supply conditions and the limitations of these. Ideally, from a child-centred point of view, matching would entail consideration of several possible foster families with a view to selecting the one with the best combination of properties for the child's characteristics, needs, interests and aspirations. More realistically, it is likely to be confined to consideration of a very limited range of possibilities and even a single placement with a view to deciding how well they or it meets the child's requirements. A serendipitously perfect fit between a child's requirements and the properties of an available resource is likely to be a very rare occurrence.

The model therefore presumes two things. The first is that the act of matching will not consist in comparing the relative merits of a range of possible placements but will be confined to either assessing or verifying the merits of one or two. The second presumption is that practitioners will necessarily be engaged in a creative process.

To take a purely analytic approach which seeks areas of compatibility between referral and resource as sets of immutable characteristics would risk too few 'matches' being found. Fitzgerald (1982) reports, for example, that insistence on - *finding* the right family for a child could leave some children in the St.Luke's project unplaced for years. Rather, the approach must be to evaluate the potential of the resource at hand to fit the child's requirements provided it is given the appropriate supports and whatever supplementary elements are necessary to reach the required standard. The analytical dimension identifies resource strengths and weaknesses in relation to the child's characteristics, needs, interests and aspirations. The creative dimension identifies appropriate supports and enhancements that could *make* the placement right for the child. For example, analysis of a resource's properties might reveal that the carers provided precisely the kind of day to day care and order the child needed but that they would struggle to help him or her with homework or meet other, developmental needs. Creative consideration would therefore be given to how these deficits might be remedied, with a bit of coaching for the carers, perhaps, or a skilled third party to help the child with school work. If the deficits still outwieghed the strengths or could not be remedied, the resource would have to be rejected but the approach would both limit the extent to which this was necessary and concentrate attention on meeting the child's placement needs in the round.

A model which proceeds from the child's requirements must incorporate a clear specification of what those requirements are, taking account of the probability that they will moderate over time in relation to the child's age and circumstances. Thoburn (1988) demonstrates how such a placement specification can be arrived at by drawing on empirical research and framing questions to pose when selecting an appropriate placement for a child. Some of this work has been incorporated into the practice aides for "matching needs, strengths and placement resources" that accompany a review of placement outcome research by the Department of Health (1991:89-137). Drawing on both sources, several key areas of information and assessment can be identified that give rise to criteria against which a placement resource should ideally be evaluated. They can be summarised as,

i) The child's background and circumstances, including information about nature and levels of abuse or neglect, why a foster placement is considered necessary and appropriate at this time and what it is intended to achieve over what duration.

ii) The child's significant relationships and how these are to be maintained and enhanced during the proposed placement.

iii) The child's care history, including all placement moves and attempts to return child home, and any implications for future placement.

iv) The child's individual care needs with respect to religious and/or ethnic background, security, continuity, and the child's strengths and personal interests that the placement should develop.

v) The child's specific needs with regard to any emotional and/or behavioural problems, education, and health and personal development and how these will be met in placement.

vi) The views on the placement of the child, parents or guardians, social worker, prospective carers and the implications of over-riding any of these

vii) Summary of placement objectives and terms including placement length, contact with family and other significant people to the child, how and by whom specific problems in relation to behavioural or emotional, education, health and social development will be addressed.

The point of covering this range of topics is to generate a rounded understanding of the child's placement requirements and the circumstances from which they arise in order to identify the properties a placement must have if it is to be successful for the particular child. It is then possible to assess whether a given resource will meet the requirements, whether it needs to be enhanced in certain ways and what these enhancements need to consist of. Decision-making in the model is child-centred but the principle objects of scrutiny are the manifest and latent properties of the resource and decision making on a placement match includes forward planning to, as far as possible, *make* a placement fit the child.

If the ultimate goal of matching is a successful placement then its practitioners will need to be very alert to predictable risks to that success. As we have seen, disruption rates of between thirty-two and forty-seven per cent have been recorded for specialist adolescent fostering so attention to factors which might undermine placement stability must be high on the agenda. Placement stability is a necessary condition of meeting other placement objectives but it is not, as Rowe *et al* (1989) remind us, a sufficient one. Possible risks to its effectiveness in meeting specified needs over time are equally important and if the potential of a resource is to be properly examined it must be looked at in the context of these risks and the steps that can be taken to mitigate them. Highlighting and mitigating foreseeable risks to placement stability and effectiveness that may become evident at any point in the discussion must be a routine part of the process by which a placement match is determined.

Even if the likelihood of placement instability or breakdown were to be reduced by rigorous risk assessment and careful placement planning, the possibility of an unplanned ending would still need to be countenanced and prepared for. No placement is ever guaranteed to proceed exactly as intended. Unplanned and unforeseen placement disruptions bring a care plan to a halt temporarily and may create a protracted care vacuum at the very point where the child is most vulnerable (Thoburn, 1988; DoH, 1991). They can be very disturbing and debilitating for the child and the carers even where gains have been made in other ways (Downes, 1982). Breakdowns impact upon the child and his or her family, particularly if he or she makes an unannounced return home (Parker, 1987) and enormous pressure is placed on the social worker to resolve the crisis quickly or find an alternative placement at short notice. These are precisely the conditions that make a sound placement most difficult to achieve. Contingency planning should therefore accompany the assessment of a prospective placement so that all parties can be clear about what is expected of them should its disruption interrupt the care plan. This is not only a prudent measure for all the adults involved but necessary to protect child and ensure that whatever gains he or she has made thus far are not reversed by the crisis.

To summarise, the theoretical model of matching is built upon standards of best practice in placement making at the time of the practice examined in this study. Its starting pointy is an explicit and comprehensive specification of the child's placement requirements as they arise from his or her present problems and strengths and from anticipated future needs. The focus of assessment is the extent to which the properties of any available resource do or could be made to meet the specified requirements. The activity of matching in the model is concerned with the evident strengths and weaknesses of a resource as it stands and the possibilities of rectifying or reducing the weaknesses by the addition of identified supports and supplementary services. Areas of risk to placement durability and effectiveness are identified and ways of mitigating these looked into. Planning is thus an intrinsic element of the matching process and extends to consideration of how the child is to be protected should the placement fail in some crucial respect. Figure 2 below illustrates the model diagrammatically. Arrows represent the flow of decision making from placement requirements as the matching criteria against which resource merits are assessed before settling on the quality of a match and the steps to be taken to enhance the potential of the placement in the child's interests.

Figure 2. Framework for matching decision making

User requirements		**Resource properties**		**Evaluation and planning**
Items on the placement specification with the needs and circumstances from which they arise	→	Appropriate resource properties present	→	How can their value be optimised
	→	Appropriate resource properties absent or weak	→	What can be done, if anything, to rectify deficits.
		Potential placement risks	→	Can these be eliminated or minimised and if so how.
Contingency plan in event that placement disrupts	→	What is the plan and what are the expectations of all those involved		

2.4.2. Implementing the model framework

The model assumes that the decision will be reached by discussion at a meeting of some kind as opposed to a purely paper exercise, for instance, or a conversation

between professionals over the telephone. Certainly, this was the common method in the practice reviewed earlier. It was also customary in the practice to involve the resource seekers and providers and, given the individualised decision making of the model, it would be important for professionals working with the child and the resource to be available to give information about them and help evaluate the match. Carers were given a significant role in decision making in the specialist schemes examined and in some cases decided placements alongside the professionals but the child and parents or guardians were far more marginal. By contrast, contemporary childcare literature stresses not only partnership with carers but also the importance of involving child and parents as closely as possible in decisions about the child's care. (Stein and Ellis, 1976; Page and Clark, 1977; Kahan, 1979; Festinger, 1983; Stein and Carey, 1986, Aldgate *et al*, 1989). Following these precepts, the model assumes the participation of relevant professionals, the prospective carers and the family in reaching a decision about the merits of a prospective placement.

The process of matching will require to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the range of issues that different cases will generate, disciplined enough to ensure that issues are thoroughly dealt with and a decision reached, and intelligible to all who take part. The practice aides provided in the DoH (1991) research review recommend certain standard for decision-making meetings which would address all three requirements. Summarised below in figure 3, these tenets of good practice emphasise the role of the chairperson in leading discussion systematically, purposefully and explicitly from evidence and interpretation to decision and planning.

Figure 3. Tenets of good meeting practice from D.o.H (1991)

i. The chairperson should ensure in advance of the meeting that it has the attendance and documents it needs to reach an informed decision.

ii. At the outset of a meeting, the chairperson should state its objectives and tasks and identify the key issues to be addressed.

iii. The chairperson should exercise sufficient control over the course of events to ensure that contributions are focused to the task and point at issue and that evidence is produced and tested when claims or assertions are made. He or she should also enable participants to contribute effectively by leading the meeting through the agenda items and issues systematically, through constructive challenge, by looking

for discrepancies, contradictions or omissions and being alert for racial, cultural, religious or gender stereotyping.

iv. Periodically, the chairperson should summarise progress in the decision making to keep the process on course.

v. Time must be allowed for summing up at the end of the meeting to ensure that all participants are clear about the decisions or recommendations reached, why they take the form they do and which tasks fall to whom.

vi. A minute should always be kept by someone other than the chairperson as a record of what decisions were made and why.

2.4.3 The model agenda of discussion

The broad areas of information and assessment identified earlier from the research translate naturally into an orderly sequence of agenda items for the focused information sharing, evaluation and forward planning intrinsic to the model in operation. It remains to identify in respect of each one the issues pertinent to placement effectiveness and stability that practitioners would need to examine in addition to whatever other relevant issues arise from individual cases.

Agenda Item 1. Child's family background, reasons for and objectives of placement

It is important to placement effectiveness and stability that those involved share a clear, common understanding of the rationale for it and the circumstances which give rise to it (Thoburn, 1988; Triseliotis, 1989; D.o.H, 1991). The opportunity to raise questions of fact and interpretation and to debate different perspectives will therefore need to be made. Similarly, placement objectives should be clear and shared by all parties for, as Rowe *et al.* (1989) found, this too is positively associated with successful placements. These researchers also found that some objectives are considerably more difficult to realise than others and carry a greater risk of failure. In their sample of specialist adolescent placements, the majority of those with the objectives to provide a 'bridge to independence' (55%) or 'care and upbringing' (59%) mostly or fully met their objectives according to the child's social worker. Placements with 'assessment' or 'treatment' objectives, on the other hand, were far less likely to be perceived as having been successful, with eighty-eight per cent and sixty-four per cent respectively only partially meeting their objectives or not meeting

them at all. The objectives of placements made to provide 'temporary care' or a 'roof over head' were essentially self-fulfilling. These findings indicate that practitioners of matching need to take special care where the more sophisticated expectations of a placement are concerned and the authors themselves conclude that placements should have written agreements in which the aims and tasks are made quite explicit (Rowe *et al. op cit.*; 185). At the very least, the term of the placement should be made quite explicit even if it has to be revised later because open-ended placement leads to drift which can be very harmful for the placed child (Milham *et al.,* 1986)

Having clarified the circumstances and objectives it is then possible to begin examining the properties of the resource against the type of placement being sought. Do the carers and any professionals supporting them have a clear understanding of the placement objectives and the circumstances from which they arise? Are there likely to be any obstacles to meeting these objectives? If the plan is reunification for the child with family, how and when is this to be achieved and what are the related tasks for the placement? What experience do the carers have with the relevant age and sex group and do they have the skills for the general tasks required? The training and experience of carers as well as their preparation in individual cases are positively associated with good placement outcomes (Thoburn, 1988; Triseliotis, 1989). Lack of relevant carer experience, if it does not rule out the resource completely, will therefore be something to which planning attention will have to be given. The kind of general support they or the child will need are elements of planning that might be considered at this early stage of the matching meeting.

<u>Agenda Item 2. Maintaining and enhancing the child's important relationships</u>

An important focus of the research consulted has been on how social workers can help maintain links between children placed away from home and the important people in their lives (Milham *et al.*, 1986; Rowe *et al.*, 1989; Farmer and Parker, 1991; DoH, 1991). Although Berridge and Cleaver (1987) found no correlation between the extent of contact between child and family and placement breakdown in intermediate fostering, placements where there was no contact at all were at least

three times as likely to break down as those where some contact was maintained. This echoes earlier findings of Fanshel and Shinn (1975) and Aldgate (1980). There are many reasons in addition to placement stability why the literature attaches such importance to family contact while child is away from home. It reduces the child's anxieties at the separation and the stress of wondering what is happening at home meanwhile. It keeps the child's place in the family especially if it is reconstituting in his or her absence. It keeps the family involved in the child's progress and is vital to the success of plans to return the child home. Contact, not only with the nuclear but also the extended family during care is important even when the child does not return home but moves to independent living. Relatives provide a link to sources of help and support on which the child can and is likely from time to time to draw (Stein and Carey, 1986).

Sibling contact is important to placement stability in its own right (Berridge and Cleaver, 1987; DHSS, 1991) and, although findings vary as to the implications of separating siblings in care, Triseliotis counsels that "it is safer to start with the principle of keeping siblings together unless there are compelling reasons not to" (Triseliotis 1989;13). By the same token, maintaining contact between siblings who are not in care together must rank high among the steps taken to reinforce the benefits of placement for any one of them.

The importance to adolescents of their peer group has long been recognised (Campbell 1964; Rutter 1979; *inter alia*) but less attention has been given in the literature to issues of separation in care from friends. It is a temptation for social workers and parents to see a child's elective peer group as a source of deviance rather than support and even to see admission to care as a means of reducing their influence. There may, however, be very significant positive relationships between a child in care and friends of their own age or adults in their home community from which severance would only cause harm and loneliness.

The location of the placement per se seems to be less important to maintaining important relationships than one might expect. Rather, it is the approach taken by social workers and carers to maintaining, encouraging and facilitating the contact which is key. Berridge and Cleaver (1987) found that, in comparison with the short- and long-term fostering they studied, children in intermediate placements tended to be further away from their own homes and yet saw rather more of their families. They linked this with the fact that intermediate placements tended to attract more and more regular involvement from specialist staff and placing social workers and there was more contact between social workers and the child's parents. Part (1993) found that distance could actually increase the contact that a child or child had with his/ her family because the carers concerned made more of an effort to bring the two together and were more likely than carers close by to invite the child's family to their home.

The message from these findings is that matching practitioners need to focus on the arrangements for keeping the child in meaningful contact with relatives and friends irrespective of the placement's proximity to his or her own community and in this the attitudes of the prospective carers could be crucial. Waterhouse, (1992) discovered considerable ambivalence among foster carers towards families of origin especially where the child had suffered neglect or abuse. In matching it would therefore be important to examine the perspective of the prospective carers on the issue and to address any difficulties they had with it. In addition, the practicalities should be looked at so that all foreseeable obstacles to the child's relationships can be removed as far as possible before the placement is begun. The way is then clear to concentrate on reinforcing and enhancing these relationships for the child's long term benefit.

Agenda item 3. Child's care history and its implications for future placement

Matching for a planned placement is likely to occur after a child has already been received into care following some kind of crisis and imminent return home has ruled out for some reason (Rowe *et al.,* 1989). There is thus a care history as well as family background to be considered and there may be implications arising from this for the future placement. Discussion of a child's care history may naturally emerge in the

context of his or her family background but there are particular considerations in relation to care experience that require a singular focus. Long periods in care, of five years and over, and several moves of placement are both associated with failure in subsequent foster placements. Berridge and Cleaver found that almost half of placements made for teenagers who had spent more than five years in care prematurely ended within a year, contrasted with fifteen per cent of placements involving those who had been in care for much shorter periods. Rowe *et al.* (1989) note the prevalence of placement moves in care even for children for whom providing stability was the main reason for their initial admission and found that instability in previous placements tended to be reproduced in further placements irrespective of the overall length of a care career.

Clearly, previous care experience cannot be undone, but accurate information about it can indicate the presence of risk to a future placement and allow for arrangements to be made in advance to give extra support to a placement when it runs into difficulties. How long the child has spent in care and how he or she has spent his or her time, the number and circumstances of changes of placement, the gains and losses that have occurred, when and how attempts to return the child home have been made and their result, are examples of the kind of information required.

Where the potential of the resource is concerned, practitioners would need to know about the placement experience of the prospective carers, how often placements with them have disrupted and the circumstances of these, and how the carers coped with the disruption. Where there are predictable risks associated with a child's or the carers' previous experience, a strategy should be agreed to help protect the prospective placement should it show signs of instability. This strategy should make provision for practical help and guidance which the carers can call upon quickly at points of crisis and similar provision should be made for the child.

Agenda item 4. Child's individual needs and strengths and the related requirements of the placement

The foregoing agenda items lead discussion through the child's past to explain why and what kind of a placement is needed now. This item is inserted to crystallise the requirements of the placement in relation to the particular problems, personality, abilities, preferences and aspirations of the individual concerned. While all children need fundamental things like security, stability, limits, and encouragement, these will have a particular quality for each individual and it is important to any placement that these qualities are appreciated (Whittaker *et al.* 1985). A child's strengths are often neglected when planning care interventions as if, by virtue of being in care, they consist only of problems and deficits (Thoburn, 1988). Strengths may define the individual more than his or her needs and are thus a critical element of individualised placement matching.

Placement requirements in respect of health, education, and behavioural or emotional problems require their own space on the agenda for reasons that will become clear. The issues which might profitably be dealt with under this item are requirements arising from religious, ethnic, cultural or linguistic background; a disability; the child's likes and dislikes; aptitudes, skills and /or interests which the placement should nurture and support. Having clarified what these are, detailed attention can then be devoted to exploring resource properties in relation to them. To what extent are the carers able to meet any special dietary requirements or arrangements for religious observance, for example? Can the child's preferences be accommodated? How would they support his or her interests and aptitudes? Can they offer new interests and skills themselves that might attract the child? Do additional resources need to be considered to support or round out the placement and how will these be provided?

A predictable point of potential friction in a placement which it would be relevant to examine in the context of the referred child's individuality is that between foster children and other children in the carer household. If the carers' children are still

living at home then matching practitioners will have to be alert to possible problems in introducing a foster child into their midst. Berridge and Cleaver (1987) found that placements where the carers' children were very young were generally avoided in specialist foster care but placements where carers' children were of a similar age to the foster child were common (64% of their sample). These placements were found to be four times more likely to breakdown in their first year than placements where the carers had no children of their own living at home. At the same time, placements where the foster child and the carers' children are contemporaries are by no means bound to fail; two thirds of those in Berridge and Cleaver's sample did not break down in the first year. Similarly, other fostered children can be a support or competition for the incoming child. The problem in identifying the implication of these findings for the model is that there is nothing to explain why some of the placements succeed and others do not and where the problems principally lie. It is an area where professional judgement must come into play taking account of the personalities involved and where it would be good practice to agree in advance broad strategies for dealing with conflict or competition between children in the household if and when it does arise.

Agenda item 5. Addressing specific behavioural and emotional problems

Berridge and Cleaver (1987) found that most of the children in their 'intermediate' sample were admitted to care following long periods of neglect or abuse and had not been admitted, explicitly at any rate, for behavioural reasons. Once in care, however, behaviour does become a significant issue and problems in this area are frequently cited as a cause of placement instability and breakdown (Berridge and Cleaver, 1987; Thoburn 1988; Triseliotis, 1989; DoH, 1991). Rowe *et al.* (1989) found that adolescents in specialist foster care tended to have more behaviour problems, such as general unmanageability, school problems, stealing and running away, than those going into ordinary foster homes. This suggests that behaviour had been an implicit criterion in the choice of a specialist placement. Potentially challenging behaviour and the emotional problems associated with it are therefore an important consideration for the theoretical model.

It is also a consideration that has to be treated with immense care. Behaviour is not a fixed characteristic but varies according to the environment a child or child is in. Past behaviour may be very much a response to past circumstances and is not a reliable predictor of how a child will be in a new placement. Moreover, different carers perceive foster children's behaviour differently and what is challenging to one carer household is not necessarily so for another. Generally speaking, the more experienced and confident the carers the less disruptive to the placement challenging behaviour from the child is likely to be (Triseliotis, 1989). Social workers in Rowe *et al. 's* sample tended not to set behavioural objectives for placements, perhaps in the expectation that whatever problems there had been in the past would be alleviated once the child was established in the new setting. They also found that where behavioural, or 'treatment', objectives were set, the social workers expressed less satisfaction with the extent to which they were met in placement than the more straightforward objectives of providing a 'bridge to independence', a 'roof over head' or general 'care and upbringing'.

Steering a way through these complexities, Thoburn and Triseliotis both recommend that where a child's behaviour seems to indicate some kind of emotional disturbance, the occasions and possible causes of the behaviour need to be clarified in the course of selecting and agreeing a future placement so that the probability of the behaviour continuing into the new placement is considered on the basis of this evidence. If there is an expectation that the child's behaviour will improve as a result of the placement then this should be stated as an objective at the outset. Furthermore, the experience of the carers and their feelings about the behavioural issues need to be clarified so that possible strategies can be debated with them to specifically address and ameliorate problems when they arise. This may require supplementary services and expertise which should be identified as part of the placement 'package' rather than being left to be found when crisis occurs.

Agenda item 6. Promoting the child's educational continuity and attainment

The education of a child or child in care gives rise to two different but related issues for placement matching, that of maintaining educational continuity and that of promoting academic achievement. Children admitted to care often do so with significant educational deficits or special educational needs (Jackson, 1988; Aldgate, Heath, and Colton , 1991; Fletcher-Campbell and Hall, 1991) and inattention to these deficits in care coupled with moves of school and care placement compound the problem (Aldgate 1990; Garnett, 1990; Scottish Office, 1988 and 1991; Cliffe, 1991). Changing placements and changing school seem to have a mutually deleterious effect. Berridge and Cleaver (1987) found that two thirds of school-age children in their sample changed schools on moving to a new placement and their placements were more likely to break down than those where the school was constant. When the placements broke down, moreover, this tended to precipitate a further school change and the disruptive cycle continued.

The attitudes of social workers can contribute to this cycle. Jackson (1988) found that social workers in her study had very low expectations of the educational achievements of children in care. The social workers interviewed by Cliffe (1991) expressed helplessness in the face of placements which disrupted the child's schooling despite being aware of and concerned at the negative effect this was having on the child's education and development.

In the theoretical model of matching these attitudes would be superseded by a more positive approach to planning for the child's education. Both Aldgate (1990) and Garnett (1990) draw attention to the higher educational achievements of children in care who have enjoyed settled placements and this reinforces the objective of the model to eliminate factors which undermine placement stability. The matching agenda would include discussion of the child's academic progress and needs with a view to ensuring the provision of appropriate help, encouragement and support during the placement. Change of school with a change of placement would be avoided as far as possible and provision made to minimise difficult journeys to

school. Proximity of a placement to the child's familiar school, at least in terms of ease of travel, could be even more important than proximity to the child's home. The arrangements for schooling therefore need close attention and any problems need to be resolved before the placement is confirmed. Where the child's education has been interrupted or their progress otherwise undermined they may need additional tutoring or help. If the carers are not themselves able to provide this, then additional professional help may be necessary. The importance of the educational dimension of public care also suggests a need for education professionals to be closely involved in the planning for if not the choice of placement.

Agenda item 7. Promoting child's health and personal development

The health of children in care is an almost wholly unresearched subject and there is clear evidence that it has not only been neglected in the research. Bamford and Wolfkind (1988) found in their survey of data available at the time that children who had been in care were gravely disadvantaged as a group with higher risks of ill health and social deviance than any other easily identified social group. Having reviewed the limited research, Kahan (1989) concluded that, far from remedying existing deficiencies in these areas, the process of care either ignored them or compounded them. Once a child or child enters care it is often the case that there is no one person familiar with his or her health history and records and the medical exam at admission can be undervalued, failing to provide comprehensive or relevant information. Medical histories themselves can be seriously inadequate if the child or child has had little medical attention from home (DoH 1990).

The message this implies for matching is that a special effort may need to be made to acquire an accurate record of the child's health history so that carers can be properly prepared for any particular needs arising from it. Consideration should also be given to maintaining or re-establishing continuity in the child's health care through good links between the placement and primary health care services.

A further dimension of health and development is how the child feels about him or herself. The prevalence of low self-esteem among children in care and the importance of remedying this through care interventions has often been commented upon (Rutter *et al*, 1970; Packman *et al.*, 1986; Milham *et al.* 1986; *inter alia*). In addition to issues of formal education, therefore, it would be important in matching to consider the contribution the proposed resource could make to the child's development of out-of-school interests and opportunities for confidence building and achievement. The interests a child may have begun to develop themselves, the recreational interests of the carer family and the facilities in the neighbourhood could all be important factors to examine in selecting an appropriate resource for the child.

Agenda item 8. Views of the parties to the placement

The participation of the child, parents and prospective carers in the decision making about a match should ensure that their views and feelings about aspects of the proposed placement become apparent in the course of that decision making. By including an agenda item specifically to capture views and feelings ensures any residual doubts and anxieties can be dealt with before agreement on the placement is reached. Clearly, unresolved reluctance, resistance or misunderstanding by any of them could undermine the placement from the start and make it difficult to agree solutions to difficulties that surface later. At the same time, unanimity on all aspects of a placement can never be guaranteed. The model therefore follows Thoburn's (1988) counsel which is to consider not only individual views but also the implications of over-riding them. This should enable serious dissent to be acknowledge and provided for either by rejecting the resource at issue in extreme cases or otherwise by keeping objections and doubts under review as the placement progresses.

Agenda item 9. Summary and contingency plan

Following the tenets of good meeting practice, the final item on the model agenda of discussion is a summary of what has gone before and the arrangements to be made should the placement not proceed as planned. We have seen that importance of clear

planning in all aspects of a placement it is to benefit the child's present and future well-being and development. Throughout the preceding discussion a number of arrangements may have been discussed to enhance aspects of the placement resource which are weak in relation to the child's needs in given areas. These need to be summarised as a whole with a clear indication of who will be responsible for putting the arrangements into effect. Otherwise there is the risk that they will simply drift and not be implemented at all. Similarly, in addressing resource weaknesses, practitioners will have alerted themselves to some placement risks which their best efforts may fail to mitigate and the placement could also fail for reasons that could not be predicted and planned for. Unless parties are prepared with explicit steps to take in the event of placement failure the child will be vulnerable to precisely the kind of ad hoc and reactive responses to crises that the theoretical model is designed to prevent.

2.4.4 Summary of the model and its standards of decision-making

The theoretical model of matching is premised on an acceptance of resource limitation and directed at creating the best placement possible for the child in these circumstances. Matching is understood as a two-dimensional process. It assesses (or verifies) the degree of compatibility between a child's particular placement requirements and the properties of one or possibly two available resources. It also identifies specific supports and supplementary services which need to be added to the placements in order to tailor it more precisely to the child's requirements. The decision making proceeds from a clear specification of the child's placement requirements through an examination of the properties of the available resource(s) to a conclusion about whether the placement would or can be made to meet these requirements. Rigorous assessment of potential risks and benefits, identifying necessary adjustments and additions to the resource, and planning for contingencies are essential components of the decision making process.

Under the well-managed direction of a chairperson, a matching meeting would systematically address a range of subject matter designed to cover the child's particular needs and placement requirements in the round. The proposed placement is

informally but explicitly tested for factors that research has shown to influence placement stability and effectiveness so that potential risks can be identified and planned for. This does not substitute for professional judgement and there may be many other issues which it is necessary to address in particular cases. The model provides a baseline for best practice and incorporates elements that are indispensable if secure and beneficial placements are to ensue.

As explained in Chapter 1 introducing this present study, its focus shifted part way through from the issue of foster placement matching for teenage girls to that of the nature of matching itself. In accordance with the first focus, data was collected on girls' cases only. In view of the Berridge and Cleaver's (1987) finding in their sample that girls' placements were almost twice as likely to break down as boys' (28% of the girls' placements failed in the first year as against 16% of the boys'), the sample for this study concerned placement that could have been predicted to be especially vulnerable. The safeguards represented in the model have a particular poignancy in this context. Unfortunately, Berridge and Cleaver were unable to account for the differential they found and could only lament the general paucity of research on girls in public care. In the absence of such an account one can only speculate that the genderised decision-making researchers have observed to operate in criminal justice and certain other areas of social work (Wilson, 1978; Bolger, 1979; Casburn, 1979; Smart, 1981; Hudson, 1982 and 1985). may also have been undermining the placements which Berridge and Cleaver studied. That is to say, assumptions based on the child's sex alone clouded professional judgement.

The essence of the theoretical model of matching is decision-making based on evidence; evidence of the placement requirements a particular child has, evidence of the properties applying to a particular resource or resources, and evidence of the presence or absence of predictable placement risks. The meeting chairperson has responsibility for maintaining this standard and of countering racial, cultural, religious or gender stereotyping that emerges in the discussion. Insofar as the vulnerability of girls' placements may be related to sexist assumption, therefore, the

model provides a measure of protection from this as well as the other risks that have been referred to. A passage from the summary of the DoH review of placement outcome research succinctly and expressively coveys the fundamental axiom on which the quality of decision making in the model rests.

> "... evidence in the sense of 'facts which lead to conclusions' must be at the heart of every decision ... Decisions can only be as good as the evidence on which they are based, and if evidence is distorted, ignored or not weighed up carefully, the decisions will be flawed. They may even be dangerous if risks and benefits are not analysed and balanced objectively." DoH (1991; 77-78)

Figure 4 below summarises the model in a form that could be followed as a real agenda of discussion and also stands as a set of standards against which the findings from this study will be compared in subsequent chapters.

Figure 4. The theoretical model of matching in summary

Chairperson introduces purpose and process of meeting; specifies any particular issues to be addressed; ensures that contributions are focused and based on evidence not assumption; ensures issues are dealt with systematically. A minute of the meeting is kept.
Item 1. Child's family background, reasons for and objectives of placement
• accurate details of family background and circumstances provided, reasons for placement given and general placement objectives made explicit • general resource strengths and weaknesses assessed in relation to objectives and potential risk factors noted (*e.g. inexperienced carers, sophisticated objectives*) • should resource be rejected or can arrangements be made to strengthen resource in relation to objectives, weaknesses and potential risks **?**
Item 2. Maintaining and enhancing the child's important relationships
• child's significant personal relationships identified • arrangements required for contact and continuation clarified • resource strengths and weaknesses assessed in relation to maintaining and enhancing child's significant personal relationships and potential risk factors noted (*eg. carer ambivalence, physical obstacles to continuation of relationships*) • can arrangements made to strengthen placement in respect of maintaining and enhancing these relationships?
Item 3. Child's care history and its implications for future placement
• accurate details of child's care career provided and implications for future placement noted • resource strengths and weaknesses assessed and risk factors noted (*eg. several prior placement moves, previous placement breakdowns, more than five years in care*) • should resource be rejected or can arrangements be made to strengthen placement, particularly in times of crisis?

Item 4. Child's individual needs and strengths and related requirements of the placement

- individual needs arising from child's unique background, personality, aptitude and aspirations
- resource strengths and weaknesses assessed in relation to these and risk factors noted (eg. *some important needs or strengths not catered for in resource*)
- should resource be rejected or can arrangements be made to strengthen placement's capacity to meet the needs and develop the strengths?

Item 5. Addressing specific behavioural and emotional problems

- circumstances and possible causes of any behavioural or emotional problems examined
- measures required to ameliorate problems which continue or emerge later in placement
- strengths and weaknesses of resource in relation to required measures examined and risk factors noted (*eg. inexperienced carers*)
- should resource be rejected or can arrangements made to ensure measures can be carried out appropriately?

Item 6. Promoting the child's educational continuity and attainment

- accurate information on child's educational history and attainment provided and any special needs noted
- strengths and weaknesses of resource examined in relation to educational continuity, attainment and any special needs to be met, and risk factors noted (*eg. disrupted education, poor attainment)*
- should resource be rejected or can arrangements be made to strengthen its capacity to address educational needs?

Item 7. Promoting child's health and personal development

- accurate information on child's health and developmental history provided and any special needs noted
- strengths and weaknesses of resource examined in relation to routine health care, meeting any additional health needs, promoting child's development and risk factors noted (*eg. health history not clear, previously unmet health needs*)
- should resource be rejected of can arrangements be made to strengthen the placement in respect of child's health and development?

Item 8. Views of the parties to the placement

- views and preferences of the child and family are established
- views and preferences of the prospective carers are established
- the implications of over-riding any of these views and preferences are fully considered
- should resource be rejected or can arrangements be made to accommodate the views and preferences

Item 9 Summary and Contingency planning

- recapitulation of main points of discussion and appraisal of resource potential
- recapitulation of arrangements necessary to strengthen proposed placement and
- Should resource be rejected?
- If not, allocation of responsibilities for ensuring identified arrangements to enhance placement are put in place
- Contingency plan in event that placement fails and allocation of responsibilities

Chairperson summarises the decision and placement plan and closes the meeting.

2.5. Conclusion and issues arising for study

The literature reviewed on specialist teenage fostering has charted its progress from a small-scale, tightly focused experiment to a mainstream service with a wide referral base and loosely defined objectives. Unable to keep pace with this expansion, the supply of placement resources became an issue for placement choice and the practice of placement selection known as 'matching'. There is little information about how matching may have adapted to these circumstances and, indeed, little clarity in the literature about what matching precisely consisted of at any stage of its development. It had certain common characteristics reflected also in the study setting; it was invested with importance, formality and the attempt at objectivity, prospective carers were closely involved in the decision making and the child and family were generally held apart from the process until a placement decision was made. No consistent picture emerged of the content of decision making, however, or the criteria applying when placements were being or were judged to be 'matched'. The study breaks new ground by considering all these factors in a close examination of matching decision making in a typical adolescent fostering scheme.

Drawing on the wider child care literature contemporary with the practice studied, a theoretical model of best practice has been devised to provide a framework for examination of the study data. (The summary of the model in figure 4 is reproduced as Appendix A at the end of the thesis for easy reference in later chapters). This Theoretical model takes account of the resource supply issues and provides a particular definition of matching which will apply throughout the study. This is that matching concerns a single referral and one, or at most two, possible placement resources. It is a child-centred and creative process that seeks to arrive at the best possible fit between an available resource and the placement requirements of the child. A number of necessary conditions follow from this definition in terms of the quality of decision making and the study will examine the extent to which these conditions applied in the practice studied.

Chapter 3.

EVOLUTION OF THE RESEARCH STRATEGY

3.1. INTRODUCTION

The study was exploratory in both its topic and form. The design of the research strategy developed in a dialectical relationship to the framing of the research question, on the one hand, and on the other, the practicalities of research and practice in the same agency. The focus and method shifted significantly during the course of the study and this chapter charts that evolutionary process in more or less the order in which it occurred. It begins, in section 3.2, by describing the general research stance. In section 3.3 the data collection process and instruments are described in the context of the theoretical principles that underpinned them. Preliminary findings, their impact on the focus of the study and the reformulated research question are explained section 3.4 and section 3.5 sets out the conceptual framework for data analysis in relation to the new problematic. The chapter concludes in section 3.6 with a summary of the strategy, a description of the analytic procedures used in each phase of analysis and the order in which the study findings will be discussed.

3.2. THE GENERAL METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH STANCE

The inquiry was concerned with the categories and reasoning practitioners ordinarily and actually applied in their selection of placements. In view of this and its exploratory nature, the data collection strategy needed to be an appreciative one that reflected the nature of these phenomena in their natural environment. It was important to ensure that the data reflected the actors' views of reality rather than the researcher's and that it reflected these views as situated phenomena firmly linked to the actuality of making placements.

It was equally important that the strategy be both feasible in the time available and rigorous in a setting where the researcher was already well known as a practitioner.

At the very least, researcher and subjects shared a general knowledge of the practice environment and it can also be assumed that there were some values and working assumptions in common. There could be no pretence of entering and studying the field as a neutral stranger.

An interpretative approach based on work by Strauss *et al* (1964; 1967; 1973) was chosen for the study because it met the requirement of being responsive to naturally occurring phenomena. It would allow respondents to bring their own definitions and significances into the study through spontaneous accounts rather than as responses to a pre-scheduled set of analytic categories which would have imposed an artificial order onto them. The approach is flexible in relation to the demands and constraints of the setting and has the additional virtue of being amenable to uncertainty about what the data would reveal as the study unfolded. Furthermore, it gives an explicit place to the subjectivity and 'native competence' of the researcher.

The interpretative approach is predicated on a conception of social reality as constituted by social subjects in the course of their mental and physical negotiations with the social and material world. It is understood not as something 'out there' created by chance or external forces but as the product of thought, deed and perception and is in a state of constant creation and recreation as people go about their everyday lives. Researching social phenomena in this paradigm is a process of observing what people ordinarily do, asking them what it means to them and understanding why they are doing it. Some form of participant observation is often involved at least to the extent of observations being made from within the setting and when people are interviewed it is ideally in an empathetic, subject to subject relation with the researcher rather than the conventional detached, object to subject relation of positivist methods. Interviewees are conceived of as knowledgeable subjects giving accounts and an open-ended style of interviewing allows the respondent freedom to develop themes and topics in their own way and express their own meanings such that new avenues of inquiry are constantly opened up to pursuit by the researcher (Oakley, 1981; Mishler, 1986; *inter alia*).

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Crucially in this methodology, the researcher begins his or her project not with a set of carefully formulated hypotheses but with a set of only general problems in mind and a theoretical framework which directs how these problems will generally be addressed (Glaser and Strauss,1967;19). Data is sifted and analysed more or less as it is collected using analytic categories and hypotheses induced from the data itself and constant comparison within and across the data sets. The analytic process continues in a progressively more refined and sophisticated way until a point is reached where an account of the phenomena is possible which accommodates all the evidence and its internal variations and contradictions (Glaser and Strauss, *op.cit*, following Becker, 1958). The researcher aims by this means to understand and objectify what the actors in the research setting understand subjectively. One form of human ingenuity, the scientific process, is applied to another, the social phenomena under investigation, in order to make explicit how these phenomena come about (Bernstein, 1976) . The central question the method poses is 'how does reality come to be constituted as a known object by mental processes?' (Johnson *et al*, 1984:78), which in the context of this study was translated as 'how does the appropriateness of a particular foster placement for an adolescent girl come to be known?'.

For a researcher already immersed in the field of study, this approach appeared to offer the minimum of artifice and the opportunity to take advantage of native knowledge of the setting and its practices. Being steeped in the culture of the research setting, the researcher should have fewer difficulties in understanding the context from which informants spoke, in communicating with them and in understanding their culturally specific language use and meanings. The advantages of the joint roles of researcher and agency employee in terms of access to the field, to subjects, and to confidential agency documents held for this as for any other methodology.

However, the close association of researcher with subjects also presented a major risk of the researcher of becoming too emotionally and intellectually identified with them and losing objectivity thereby. There was also the problem of how to deal with possible 'observer effects' on the data arising from subjects' familiarity with the

researcher's perspective as a colleague and the temptation they may feel to take a stance in relation to this rather than their own, independent viewpoint.

Collins (1984) suggests a way through these problems in the concept and practice of 'participant comprehension' in which 'going native' is not a problem but an objective. In participant comprehension the researcher sets out to acquire 'native competence' similar to his subjects by participating alongside them and contributing actively to the same project as they. For example, Collins worked on a series of laboratory experiments alongside physicists in which the experimental subjects were children. Simultaneously he pursued his own participant comprehension research on the everyday knowledge of experimental scientists (his 'real' subjects, so to speak) as he acquired it for himself. Comprehension is achieved, Collins explains, when the phenomena under investigation cease to be strange, bizarre or incoherent and become internalised by the investigator to the extent that he or she can

> "act in the same way as the native member 'as a matter of course' rather than remember or record the details of *their* interactions ... The stress is not on recording events ... but on internalising a way of life ... Once this has been achieved, observation may as well be done on the investigator as on other native member, for he/she should be like a native member. We might call this 'participant introspection'. In this method, then, the distinction between observer and observed is blurred."
> (*ibid*; 61)

Defending this degree of immersion he argues that, since there is anyway "no objective external index of success in understanding" and since all sociological method in practice involves compromises of some sort with the ideal, participant comprehension makes only different, not less valid, compromises. It is no less replicatable or objective than complete observation.

Another way of expressing the mode of inquiry which Collins proposes might be as an 'apprentice member' of the community being simultaneously studied and the approach was very attractive in the context of this study. It would allow the researcher to take an authentic role as a novice in an enterprise in which research subjects were the experts. Not only, therefore, does the researcher come to understand how subjects know and apply what they know in a very direct and

intimate way, a relationship is created between researcher and subject in which neither need be surreptitious or unnaturally reticent for mutual influence between apprentice and master would not be an obstacle. However, the conditions of the study ruled out a method which required the researcher to be available to practice alongside the subjects of the study. It was also too complicated an undertaking for a singleton researcher. Collins himself acknowledges how difficult it is to document and report on 'comprehended' data collected by complete participation even when, as in his project, a second researcher is available to debrief with. A compromise was therefore made in which the mode of apprentice member was taken as the general mode on which to base the style and content of research techniques which would be more practicable in the circumstances. I explain how the choice of technique was made in the section following.

3.3. THE DATA COLLECTION PROCESS, PROCEDURES AND INSTRUMENTS

The general methodology of Glaser and Strauss has been given various practical interpretations and one of these, described by Wiseman (1978; 113-119) through the metaphor of a classic crime mystery, provided the basic modus operandi of the present study.

> "Starting with a few clues, the detective [the researcher] questions persons connected with the case, develops hunches, questions further on the basis of those hunches, begins to see a picture of 'what happened' start to emerge, looks for evidence pro and con, elaborating or modifying that picture - until finally the unknown is known ... The facts have been 'organised' in a way to accommodate - with as few contradictions as possible - the largest amount of empirical data... Qualitative research is like a detective story that starts out with no suspects. Thus the outcome is quite open" (*ibid.;* 113)

The metaphor seemed particularly apt because, although the general approach and areas of concern in the study were clear, the specific issues for which evidence would be required were not. It was important therefore that all phenomena encountered should be treated with scientific suspicion to begin with. At the same time, the aim was to understand why subjects acted as they did; motive, so to speak, was a critical

area of interest. By approaching the task in clear practical stages as Wiseman does, beginning with a broad and generally inquisitive perspective which is systematically narrowed down to essential questions, the project could be made manageable and rigorous without losing anything that might be relevant and important to its ultimate quest.

3.3.1. Exploratory fieldwork

In Wiseman's technique the 'clues and hunches' which first direct the researcher's interest are translated into an initial topic list which guides exploratory fieldwork. The first batch of data is then reviewed against the topic list in order to establish what has been learnt in relation to the initial questions posed and what further questions arise. The topic list is revised and augmented accordingly prior to further periods of fieldwork. The same procedure was employed in the present study during twelve months of preliminary fieldwork, the first nine months of which were spent gaining a detailed perspective on the agency context of the adolescent fostering scheme and its practices, its perceived status in the range of child-care interventions and provisions and its administrative procedures. Practitioners directly involved in selecting and making placements were observed and talked with in the course of their routine activities and planned, informal interviews were conducted with some of these key personnel to pin down contextual details. Figure 1 below lists the individuals interviewed at this stage with their agency titles in the left hand column and the main areas covered in the interviews in the right hand column. The interviews were taped and transcribed .

Figure 1. Personnel and themes involved in information gathering interviews

Informant	Topics covered
Divisional director Area social work team manager/ foster panel chairperson Divisional assistant/ foster panel chairperson Senior manager of fostering and adoption Adolescent fostering scheme co-ordinator Carer liaison worker Area team social worker/ foster panel member	Main tasks of job, Routine procedures and tasks in which involved, Principal contacts in job, Equivalent personnel in other parts of agency, Where does job fit in agency child care systems

Referrals for placement through the adolescent fostering scheme were vetted by Fostering Panels in each of the six geographic and administrative divisions of the agency and were then matched to resources by sub-groups of these panels. Routine Fostering Panel and matching meetings were observed in five divisions; access was denied in the sixth because the staff had recently participated in a time consuming research exercise of their own. In a parallel process to referral and matching, the specialists who co-ordinated the fostering scheme and supported the carers met to make 'preliminary links' between referrals and available resources on the scheme's register. Three of these meetings, each lasting about three hours, were observed during the preliminary fieldwork phase. In addition, the researcher attended a seminar held for agency staff on the subject of placement matching and, as with all other meetings and activities observed, notes were made both during and after the event. Agency documents of various kinds were collected throughout the period of fieldwork and subsequently.

The last three months of exploratory fieldwork were used to narrow down the focus of the research topic and form and to design a set of procedures to collect specific data from a select sample of practitioners about their practice. This was a more formal part of the strategy in that it involved pre-arrangement in the setting and structured research instruments and it is described as such next.

3.3.2. Formal data collection and research instruments

Wiseman proposes that some early analytic decisions should be taken after a second wave of fieldwork of which the most important is the researcher's decision as to what data will become the main focus of analysis and what data will be relegated to the position of background or 'givens'. Although preliminary findings inform this choice, it is ultimately an arbitrary one but failure to take it "results in a study in which so much is in major focus that analysis is impossible." (*ibid*; 119). From this first major organisational decision the researcher can proceed to the next which is what Wiseman calls the "organising scheme of analysis". This comes out of the data already gathered and loosely coded and aids the categorisation of data yet to come. It

is essentially a process of clarifying the deeper understanding thus far gained of the phenomena under study, identifying the issues which it seems most fruitful and important to pursue and settling upon the way in which these issues will be addressed in analysis.

The experience of this study was that deciding upon the data and precise questions to be foregrounded was extremely difficult for an inexperienced researcher tackling an area new to research. It was, in fact, a decision which was made twice, once before the substantial portion of data was collected and again afterwards. The second decision followed the reframing of the central research questions and I shall deal with it in that connection later. In the first instance, however, the decision was taken to centre data collection around the meetings where referrals were formally and finally matched to resources and to centre analysis on the nature of particular choices of placement resource for particular girls. A plan was made to sample eight cases of matching between referrals and resources. The matching meetings would be observed and key professional participants in the meetings would be interviewed in depth about the background to the decision which the meeting came to in respect of the prospective placement. The aim of the interviews would be to examine practitioners' understanding of the links between needs in adolescent girls and the properties of foster care in both the particular cases and more generally. The aim of the observation would be to collect 'naturally occurring' data situated within the decision making to take forward into the interviews and thereby ensure continuity between the reality of making placements and the more contrived encounter of the research interview.

Matching meetings were held in respect of all specialist foster placements for adolescents and no placement could begin until a matching panel had ascertained its merits. By commencing formal data collection at these meetings it was possible to ensure a sample of cases for which placement was a real possibility. For a variety of reasons, not all referrals reached this point. In addition, the meetings promised to be a rich source of data on precisely the phenomena the study was interested in.

According to informants spoken with during preliminary fieldwork, the function of the matching meetings was to ensure that a resource would meet the child's needs. It was a kind of insurance against ill-considered placements and a means of making individual placement decisions accountable to the agency. It was a reasonable presumption, therefore, that these meetings would include substantial discussion of both the particular girl's needs and the qualities of the particular resource at hand. Where decisions were reached that placements were not 'matched' in this sense, the interviews would examine with the practitioners why they believed this was so, and similarly with decisions that went the other way. Any expressed dissent from the decision would provide an additional line of enquiry.

The choice of which practitioners to interview was made partly on theoretical and partly on practical grounds. Broadly speaking there were three types of participant in matching; resource Seekers, resource Providers and the panel whom I shall also be referring to as Regulators. The key members of these groups in terms of authority and continuity in the proceedings before and after matching appeared to be, respectively, the child's social worker, the agency liaison worker with the prospective carers and the panel chairperson. These were therefore the practitioners selected for interview in relation to each sample meeting so that a range of professional perspectives would be represented in the data without extending the overall number of people interviewed beyond what was manageable within the constraints of the study.

Careful consideration was also given to the timing of the practitioner interviews. As I have said, the intention was to base at least part of the interviews on what had taken place in the meetings. Each data collection event was to provide a different vantage point from which to view the mental links practitioners made between needs and the choice of resource to meet them. Inevitably, some elements of the thinking which underpinned the process of reaching a placement decision would lose their immediacy in the artificial, *post hoc* interview setting and would be reassembled and rationalised within the interview exchange (Silverman, 1985). However, one wanted to minimise the extent to which interview respondents were required to engage in

rationalisation of this kind. The interviews were therefore planned to take place as soon as possible after the relevant meeting and before any major advance was made in the case such as introducing the child to the resource or setting about the search for an alternative. In addition, the interview schedule was designed to lead respondent's thinking forward from the matching discussion and I shall come to this shortly.

In addition to post-matching interviews with the social worker, liaison worker and panel chairperson, follow-up interviews were planned for at least six months after each matching meeting to provide a longitudinal dimension to the project. The aim of the follow-up interviews was to examine the outcomes of the matches made in the meetings in terms of the child's placement and care plan and to study stability and change in the placement needs assessed. Given that Seekers were the only practitioners in the sample certain to have a continuing role in the child's case irrespective of the matching meeting's decision, the follow-up interviews were limited to this group of respondents.

The research instruments consisted of note-taking aids for formal observation, interview schedules for the first set of practitioner interviews with a self-rating questionnaire for each practitioner interviewed, and a topic list for the unstructured follow-up interviews with the social workers. All these were piloted three times with practitioners not involved in the formal stage of data collection and the revisions incorporated into the final versions which I describe below.

Observation schedules

These consisted of a set of proforma which made provision for recording basic details of the time and location of each meeting, details of its participants, their seating arrangement and their contributions. Columns were provided to record speakers, their topics, notes for analysis and issues to raise in the practitioner interviews which followed. A list of preliminary analytic topics drawn from the literature and from preliminary fieldwork was appended to assist in process recording the discussion. The contents of the proforma are shown in Appendix B.1.

Semi-structured interview schedules

These were prepared on the basis of two types of consideration; style and content. Their design was based on the premise that a research interview is a dyadic engagement between interviewer and respondent and the latter's account emerges in context of interaction between the two parties (McCall and Simmons, 1966). The engagement is driven by inter-subjective practices, negotiation and legitimisation as well as questions and answers, in much the same way as any other social encounter. At the same time, however, the purpose of the exchange is primarily the interviewer's, whatever rewards the interviewee might also get from it. The approach taken was therefore to stimulate a conversation around particular topics which would lead both interviewer and interviewee in certain directions.

Whilst the interviewer restricted the extent to which she commented on respondents' contributions, this kind of interaction was not ruled out entirely and affirmations such as "yes, I see what you mean", or "I have noticed that myself", or "that's interesting, could you expand" sat more naturally in the style of the interview exchange than their absence would have done. However, care was taken to avoid expressing judgements. Holding in mind throughout the interview the relationship of 'apprentice to expert' which I have discussed allowed probes such as "could you explain what you mean by", and "do you mean to say" to occur in an unchallenging way and enabled the exchange to proceed in accordance with its purpose and reasonably naturally in conversational terms.

The interview schedule was constructed in two parts, the first focusing on the particular case which had been matched and the second leading the exchange into wider issues of general relevance to the assessment of girl's needs and the meaning of foster care as an intervention. The first part was constructed to mimic the sequence of events found in fieldwork to proceed from admission of the child to care through choice of intervention, referral for foster placement and matching with a particular

resource. The second part took the exchange from the respondent's views about the importance of the family in general, and in social work in particular, the value they attached to foster care and their understanding of the needs of adolescent boys and girls in care, to a final question about the impact on their thinking of the interview itself. This last question was added to provide a means of recording interview effect on the data.. Both parts of the interview aimed to lead the respondent towards the central issues of the study from a variety of directions. The contents of the interview schedule are listed in Appendix B.2.

The self-rating questionnaire

Prior to the first interview with each respondent, they were asked to complete a short sequence of self-assessment questions by selecting from five scaled responses on each. This procedure was adopted to place each practitioner in the sample profile in terms of experience, attitude to work with adolescents, understanding of agency placement policy and views on agency practice. The questionnaire is reprinted in Appendix B.3.

Unstructured follow up interviews with child's social worker

Since what actually followed each matching meeting could not be predicted with any certainty, no schedule was prepared for the follow-up interviews. Instead, a set of basic topics was drawn up for discussion with the social workers to which other topics arising from the observation and the first interview could be added. The basic topic list was as follows:

what has happened to the child since the matching meeting?
how well matched does the placement now seem?
how would the social worker now describe the child's needs?
have the needs changed - what, if anything, has happened to change them?
were they correctly assessed in the first place?

Over the course of a twelve month period, nine placement matching meetings were observed, two being held for the same case, each of which took between thirty and

ninety minutes. Over a twenty month period, thirty-two interviews were conducted with practitioners which lasted between one and a half and three hours each. The first set of interviews took place within a week of the associated matching meeting and the follow-up interview with the child's social worker was conducted six to nine months after the first. As I have said, all observations and interviews were taped and transcribed.

Sampling

Sampling centred on instances of matching and therefore began at the point of the matching meeting. The cases included in the sample largely followed from this. However, some attempt was made to ensure that the sample reflected a variety of case particulars within the normal range for cases matched in the adolescent fostering scheme during the same period. An ideal profile for the sample was drawn up with the help of the scheme co-ordinator to reflect case and meeting features which she saw as typical of the scheme and which would also provide variety and range in the data. The profile set out a theoretical sample of eight cases of adolescent girls for which matching meetings were planned which varied according to the girl's age, personal circumstances and reasons for care admission.

Figure 2. Theoretical profile for selection of sample

Two cases each where the basis of admission to care was,	• lack of care and protection • school problems • moral danger • offending
Variation in family circumstances such as	• lone parent mother/ or father, broken and /or reconstituted family, joint natural parents • materially adequate or poor family environment
Variation between twelve and sixteen years in children's ages	

Using this as a guide, the scheme co-ordinator notified cases to the study at intervals throughout a twelve month period. Cases for the study were selected with reference to the profile and to convenience of attendance until the quotas of eight cases was reached. The resultant study sample comprised of nine matching meetings because

two meetings had been held for one of the cases. The cases themselves did not meet the profile criteria in every respect, the reasons for admission were less varied than hoped, but were subsequently confirmed as typical of the scheme by a survey of all scheme referral records over the sampling period.

Once a case and its matching meeting had been selected arrangements were made to attend and tape record the proceedings for transcription and to conduct the first set of practitioner interviews within the days immediately following. The interviews were also tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Intended mode of analysis

The procedures by which the meeting and interview data were to be sifted, classified and analysed were at this stage conceived of only in broad and general terms. Following Bloor (1978; 546) in his study of surgeon's decision making, the data were first to be grouped according to the matching meeting disposal. The data sets related within one disposal category were then to be examined on a case by case basis in a process which triangulated and compared meeting and interview data on the themes of 'child's needs', 'resource properties', and 'link between needs and resource'. Sub-categories and definitions within these themes would be developed and subsequently compared with the results of a similar process being applied to cases in other disposal categories. Deviant cases (*i.e.* where common features were lacking) were to be scrutinised in order to ascertain whether the provisional list of case features could be adapted to include them or the classificatory system required to be modified to embrace their particular peculiarities. By this means, the nature of the links which the practitioners were making between the needs of the adolescent girls in the sample and the benefits of the resources in the variety of case and disposal circumstances would become accessible to description and explanation.

This initial plan for analysis had to be significantly revised, however, not least because the data did not provide for comparison between disposals. This was one

among several early findings that led to a thorough review of the research strategy, as I shall explain.

3.4. REFRAMING THE PROBLEMATIC IN THE LIGHT OF PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The final stages of formal data collection represented a major turning point in the study for findings were already beginning to emerge that challenged some of the fundamental assumptions on which the study had so far been based. On closer inspection, the meetings had turned out to be rather different than expected and where the study had started out to examine what needs the practitioners were matching to which resource properties and why, these early findings suggested a more immediate problem might be *whether* needs were the central issue in placement matching and if so in what way?

A premise on which formal data had begun was, not unreasonably, that matching meetings existed to consider each case on its merits and centre the decision making on the question of how well the resource at issue appeared to meet the needs of the particular referred child. It was a premise which had been shared openly with research subjects and had not been challenged or contradicted. Moreover, during the fieldwork period, a staff seminar had been held in the agency where the official aspiration of child-centred placement matching had been highlighted and reinforced in precisely these terms.

An assumption arising from the premise of individualised decision making, again not an unreasonable one, was that it would result in some prospective placements being found to match and others not. Resources for adolescent foster placement were scarce in the agency at the time and choice was reduced to one allocated resource by the time a referral came to be matched. The possibility in such circumstances of ill-matched resources being allocated and ultimately being found not to match therefore seemed at least as high as the possibility that they would match.

A further working assumption was that the matching meetings would involve a recognisable process of assessing the properties of the resource in the light of the needs and placement requirements of the child. This, after all, would be consistent with their ostensible function. The meetings were organised rather like tribunals with a panel of practitioners presiding who were directly connected neither with the referral nor the resource and who were invested with responsibility for the decision the meeting made. Given the uniqueness of each child and each resource presented to them, it was a fair presumption that panel members would first need to be informed about both in some detail and then, on the basis of this information, would engage in some fairly visible process of comparison between the two before deciding whether or not they matched sufficiently for the proposed placement to be endorsed.

Weaknesses in all these premises and assumptions were exposed as the data collection stage neared its end. In the first place, the method of matching employed in the sample meetings was obscure. Despite their apparent status in the agency and the considerable staff resources committed to them, the meetings were conducted rather informally and without a written agenda to follow or a concurrent minute being taken of the process followed and judgements made. It proved to be extremely difficult through observation and note-taking alone to follow the process of decision making and to identify precisely where and what needs were being defined or how these were being linked to the resource. This in turn affected the content of the practitioner interviews which were intended to explore in depth precisely these definitions and linkages. The methodological connection thus began to unravel. The interviews did generate data in response to the topics and questions presented to subjects on need assessment, resource properties and links being made between the two but this was directly in response to interview questions put and it was not at all clear how or even if the resultant data related to the decision making that had actually taken place.

A second major problem arose from the nature of the sample decisions themselves for there were no instances where placements were not found to match. In one case, the decision of the first meeting was postponed to a second but this, like all the other

sample meetings, found the referral and resource they had been discussing to be matched. The sample set of meetings had failed to produce a range of outcomes and thereby had denied the opportunity to compare the data across a range as planned.

There was no obvious explanation in the sampling procedure for the apparent bias in outcome and there were no central records of meeting outcomes to refer to for comparison. Enquiries back in the field revealed an element of common knowledge that had been missed in earlier fieldwork. This was that matching meetings seldom resulted in anything other than placement approval. Decisions were occasionally deferred but an outcome that led to a placement being rejected was apparently extremely rare.

If the outcome of matching meetings was so predictable, then the question arose as to what they were really for. They might have been mere formalities but their participants appeared to be engaged in sometimes intense and detailed discussion to which they seemed wholly committed. Moreover, the circulation of background papers, the convening of special panels, the requirement for certain practitioners to attend and the sheer commitment of human resources suggested that something more than rubber-stamping was expected from them. The meetings were an enigma and it seemed that without understanding more about their actual form and function, the question of why particular resources were selected for particular children could not be properly addressed.

It will be recalled that both observation and interview techniques were piloted in the field before the sample series commenced. It was of some concern, therefore, that these measures had failed to alert the researcher to the problems that subsequently became so apparent. The explanation appeared to lie, at least in part, in the problem of being and remaining too close to the data. Being both practitioner and researcher in the same agency had, as anticipated, facilitated access in respect of both data sources and recognition of meaning in certain idiomatic and culturally specific uses of language. At the same time, however, it had also made it difficult to stand back

from the assumptions that underlay the phenomena under study. It was really not until some of the data from the series of interviews and observations had been converted into the impersonal form of transcripts that it was possible to suspend belief and regard the data more objectively and critically. Hughes (1994; 41) describes a similar experience of being lost in the data when, a stepmother herself, she was researching the myths and realities of stepmotherhood,

> "the extent of my immersion in the lives of the research families created a level of knowledge which had rendered it difficult to disentangle 'what everyone knows' from a more systematic application of concepts when reading the data."

Quite simply, too much had been taken for granted in familiarity with the setting with the result that the study had failed to problematise the meaning of matching in it.

As a result of these preliminary findings and the issues they raised, concern with the nature of matching in practice and how it was done replaced the initial research questions which had been concerned with what was being matched and whether it could be said to be gendered. The issue became less 'why is this being matched with that' and more a matter of what matching meant in the setting, what it consisted of and why it was the way it was. Within this broad question was the crucial issue of where, and possibly even if, the child's placement needs fitted into it all.

3.4.1. Reappraising and realigning the data sets

Taking the nature of matching as the central problematic, all the data were reviewed and fresh consideration was given to how they should be analysed. It was not possible by this stage to collect substantial new data and so it was a question of using the completed data sets in a way other than originally intended.

There were problems with the data sets in this regard. At the time of observing the meetings few notes about the actual proceedings had been made because this was not the primary object of interest at the time. The difficulties encountered in understanding them had been regarded at best in a manner described by Silverman (1993; 146) as **"the gaze of the tourist, bemused with a sense of bizarre cultural practices"** rather than as an analytic problem to be solved. Similarly, the practitioner interviews

had not directly addressed issues related to the procedure, process or meaning of matching *per se.*

However, the tape transcripts of the sample meetings made initially as *aide-memoirs* were verbatim records of matching in process and thus a very direct source of data on the nature of matching as practised. They were accordingly assigned the central role within the data sets. Whilst the interviews had not set out to explore the process of matching, they had produced important data on the practitioners, children and resources in the sample and the setting. The documents and field notes collected for background information could be read in Zelditch's (1980; 122) terms as accounts made outside the confines of the study but highly germane to it. It was possible, therefore, that these various data could reveal typical features in the context and practise of matching if analysed from this perspective.

In the course of reappraising the data, a survey of central referral records was made to ascertain that the sample could be taken as a reflection of mainstream practice. This was an important step in view of the small size of the sample and the intention to identify typical features of the practise it exemplified. The theoretical model of matching was developed to provide a definition of the function of matching and a best practice framework against which to consider the data. Finally, the theoretical framework for analysis was redesigned to accommodate the nature of the data in the context of the questions that they were now being required to address and it is to this aspect of the methodology that I now turn.

3.5. RECASTING THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

The ostensible function of matching meetings was to make decisions, in the form of recommendations to a senior agency officer, and as Boden (1994; 183) has observed, decisions in the making are elusive phenomena,

> "a central problem is that decision-making is incremental and fragmentary. Actual decisions in organisations are virtually invisible, yet they are the "quanta" out of

> which pivotal choices are made, undesirable strategies avoided, and critical paths taken... Decisions, as identifiable items, become clear only after their constitution"

Analysing the nature of decision-making in the matching meetings was therefore going to be a major challenge. In working towards it, however, some obvious features of the matching meetings provided the essential key. The process of making a matching recommendation came into being at the point where participants grouped and began to interact with this as their common purpose. The matching meetings can therefore be seen in Interactionist terms as "cultural events which members make happen" through their shared understandings and co-operative effort (Cuff and Sharrock, 1986; 5). There were no robes of office, special seating arrangements, forms of address or specified details of procedure. The meetings were required by the agency to take place at a certain stage in foster placement making but it was then left to the experience and discretion of the practitioners directly involved to determine what should happen at them according to their own interpretations and understandings of their task.

What the practitioners actually did in matching was to *talk*. Matching was primarily an oral practice and the concrete evidence of the practitioners' performance, interpretation and understanding of their task lay in what they said, how and when they said it. It was through their interactive talk that the method of matching and its relevant content was constituted, the recommendation formed and the phenomenon of matching as a cultural practice realised. By examining the nature of this talk, therefore, it should be possible to develop an illuminating account of the practice and its particular qualities.

With this conception of the project, recourse was made to language-centred theories of social action and its analysis to develop analytic procedures to apply to the data. A key concept in developing this analytical framework was that of 'communicative competence' which Gumperz and Hymes (1972; vii) define as

> "what the speaker needs to know to communicate effectively in culturally specific settings ... students of communicative competence deal with speakers as members of

> communities, as incumbents of social roles, and seek to explain their use of language to achieve self-identification and to conduct their activities"

The analysis proceeded from the basic assumption that the participants in matching knew how to formulate utterances, or silences for that matter, in ways that other participants would recognise as appropriate to the setting and its purpose. There may have been different levels of expertise in this specialised communicative competence but lack of it altogether would have made it impossible to participate effectively at all.

The language environment of matching can be looked at through two different, but ultimately related theoretical frameworks; as social discourse, analysed as the construction of realms of knowledge, belief, and social relations through language production and consumption (Crystal, 1987; Potter and Wetherell, 1987) and as institutional talk, analysed as speech interaction in institutional contexts (Drew and Heritage, 1994). A helpful bridge across these two approaches is provided in Fairclough's (1993; 135) concept of the 'discursive event', or particular instance of language production and consumption which can be analysed as "text, as discursive practise and as social practise". A discursive event, of which an article, a lecture, a trial and a meeting are some examples, embodies the constitutive powers of social discourse, Fairclough argues, and can therefore be analysed as such. At the same time, it is sufficiently limited in time and space to be amenable to detailed examination of its linguistic practices and content. As a discursive event, therefore, a matching meeting can be fruitfully examined using the analytic resources of both approaches.

Discourse analysis and the analysis of interactive talk (or 'conversation analysis' as it is more often referred to) are both substantial analytic stratagems in themselves and necessarily the methods used in the present study drew very selectively on them. Selection was very pragmatic and directed to the goals of, firstly, getting to grips with the nature of the data and, secondly, devising techniques to examine the data for evidence of the nature of matching. The particular analytic resources drawn from the two approaches are discussed below under the sub-headings of 'matching meetings

as discourse' and 'matching meetings as institutional talk'. The subsequent paragraphs under the sub-heading 'Analysing the discursive event of matching' explain how these resources were linked in a unified analytic strategy for the study.

3.5.1. Matching meetings as discursive events

Parton (1991) defines discourse very succinctly as,

> "structures of knowledge through which we understand, explain and decide things. They are structures of obligations which establish different responsibilities and authorities for different categories of persons such as parents, children, social workers, doctors, lawyers and so on. They are impersonal forms, existing independently of any of these persons as individuals. They are historical and political frameworks of social organisation that make some social actions possible whilst precluding others. (Parton, 1991;3)

The method of discourse analysis aims to deconstruct a discourse in order to discover the implicit rules and relations which condition its particular production; the rules, that is, which determine what can and cannot be said in a particular discourse, which allow some statements to be recognised as true and others as false, which allow "the construction of a map, model or classificatory system, ... allow us to identify certain individuals as authors; [and reveal] when an object of discourse is modified and transformed." (Parton *op.cit*: 4)

In explicating his 'grand theory' of discourse, Foucault (1972) argued that discourse analysis is appropriate only where the analyst was distanced historically from the discursive epoch being examined. However, Parton employed the method very productively in his study of the evolution of the concept of 'child protection', its practical expression in state intervention in the family, and the rise of social work as the key institution in this intervention. It has also been used to examine social structures, behaviour and meanings in highly specific, contemporary social contexts such as science laboratories (e.g. Gilbert and Mulkay 1982 and 1984) and Potter and Wetherell (*op.cit*; 1-6) argue that the analysis of social texts can be productive and illuminating wherever human beings "use language to do things".

In the analysis of language being used to do matching, four particular properties of discourse provided the fulcra around which analytic procedures were designed. These were the power of discourse to constitute meaning, the cross-fertilisation or 'interdiscursivity' of discourse, the nature of discourse objects and identities, and the limitations on scope and relevance which any discourse imposes.

The constitution of meaning

Language use associated with social work is an example of social discourse that extends from international debates about the provision of social care down to the particularities of communication between individual social worker and client. Indeed, the very identities of 'social worker' and 'social work client', or 'user' as this role is more often now known, are contingent firstly on there being a social work discourse and secondly on the particular nature of this discourse. Language use associated with foster placement matching can be seen as a microcosm of the wider social work discourse which constitutes meanings for the concepts which form its basic currency. The very word 'matching', for example, has a particular meaning in this micro-discourse, the concept of a 'placement resource' has a narrow and specialised interpretation and it is possible too that understandings of 'need' and 'meeting need' take on semantic properties in the context of matching which are more specific to it than the meanings they have in social work more generally.

Interdiscursivity

Discourses exchange meanings with each other both horizontally across contemporary discourse and vertically through historical epochs such that within one recognisable discourse will be many strands which owe their origins to other discursive traditions, discipline and epochs (Gordon, 1980). This interdiscursivity is an important characteristic of discourse for different strands of discourse can co-exist, often have differential force upon the whole and may compete with or contradict each other causing new meanings and identities to be forged. Elements of the discourses of psychology and sociology are melded into the fundamental knowledge base of social work, for example, and latterly the discourse of commerce has permeated it. The transformations of social services into 'provision' and

'commissions', and the transformation of the 'social work client' into a 'service user' are examples of new meanings and identities formed from the far from smooth assimilation of commercial concepts into the language of welfare. They are also examples of the power of the commercial discourse over the social work discourse at a certain point in history.

The practice of matching studied had evolved over several years and, we can presume, had been subjected to a variety of influences from within and outside of its immediate context in the process. To view matching as a form of discourse is to acknowledge its historical, evolutionary and interdiscursive character and to highlight the probability that data on the matching process will exhibit not only explicit conventions which originated somewhere in the past but also implicit understandings which have different provenance and which may contradict and compete with each other.

Identities and objects

A further fundamental feature of discourses is that they are constructed upon implicit propositions which are taken for granted by participants and which underpin their coherence (Labov and Fanshel, 1977; Button and Lee, 1987). It is on the foundation of these tacit 'givens' that discourse develops its particular subject identities ('experts', 'authorities' and 'amateurs' in a given discipline, for example) and its particular 'objects of knowledge', or phenomena that are experienced and understood to be known by discourse subjects. Concepts and practices such as 'assessment', 'care management', 'care planning' and so on are 'objects of knowledge' within the social work discourse which derive their particular and changing meanings from the continuous practice of thinking, hearing, speaking and writing in the particular language of social work. The decisions which social workers make (for instance, about the form of intervention that is appropriate) are also objects of knowledge and thus we can see the decision made about a placement at a matching meeting as an object of knowledge constituted meaningfully within the language used in its making. What it means to seek, provide and regulate a placement match also has a specific

form in the context of matching, and thus the identities of those who perform these functions will be formed in a particular way through the discourse of matching.

Scope and relevance

Discourses have been described as "systems for the possibility of knowledge" (Philp, 1985; 69) in that they provide scope for new facts and understandings to be established within a bounded field of social activity while simultaneously constraining what facts will be regarded as true and what understandings as valid. The ideological and intentional frame of a discourse structures what it is *conceivable* for subjects to discourse about and how. As Kress (1985; 6-7) has expressed it, discourses comprise of

> "systematically organised sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution...A discourse provides a set of possible statements about a given area, and organises and gives structure to the manner in which a particular topic, object, process is to be talked about"

Scope and relevance are therefore features of a discourse which subjects internalise when participating in it. The boundaries of a discourse may be progressively pushed outwards such that new knowledge develops but this will only be understood as new and relevant knowledge by reference to the built in constraints (the implicit propositions) of the discourse. Applying this insight to the discourse of matching, it can be appreciated that it will be implicitly constrained such that only certain topics will be conceivable by practitioners as relevant to discuss when matching placements and only certain interpretations of need, resource and placement match will be conceivable as valid.

3.5.2. Matching talk as institutional talk

Institutional talk, that is, talk in an institutional setting or for an institutional purpose, is differentiated from ordinary conversation by its direct association with the practical goals of the institution, or agency, which at least one of the speakers is representing in the interaction (Drew and Heritage (1992;22-29) It builds upon the procedures of ordinary conversation in ways specially adapted to institutional goals

(Maynard and Clayman, 1991). Thus, the everyday taken-for-granted rules of conversation which give it coherence as an activity of some mutual understanding tend to acquire specialised formation in furtherance of institutional objectives. Matching talk is an example of 'conversation' directed towards the institutional objective of matching foster placements resources and referrals. Its form may also be related to other, more generalised and implicit institutional goals but the object of interest in this study is what the specialised formation of matching talk reveals about the nature of the decision making about foster placements.

Studies of institutional talk have proceeded from the techniques of conversation analysis and are similarly concerned with identifying and describing the implicit operational apparatus and methods which make talk, as interaction, intelligible and meaningful to its participants. These techniques examine the sequential organisation of talk, the rules of turn-taking and the range of implicit and explicit linguistic codes and procedures which enable speakers to collaborate in the interaction in more or less orderly ways. (Heritage and Greatbatch, 1989). The application of these techniques to institutional data is a relatively new departure but some importance characteristics of the talk have already been established which serve as potentially fruitful analytic resources for further study of the phenomenon. This study focused on four such characteristics which I shall go on to discuss; the strategic formation of the talk, its specialised speech exchange systems, the differential interlocutory power of certain types of utterance prevalent in institutional talk and the relationship between implicit speaker rights and explicit institutional roles.

The strategic formation of institutional talk

Many kinds of institutional encounter are enacted through a task-related standard 'shape' or order of phases (Drew and Heritage, *op.cit*; 43-45) which is rationally adapted by participants to the accomplishment of institutional tasks as they understand them to be (Levinson, 1992). The sequence of phases in a reasonably orderly decision making meeting is just such a task-related shape. Meeting participants would orientate to the scheduling of phases during the meeting as purposeful phenomena and organise their own contributions accordingly, (Cuff and

Sharrock, 1986). Given that they were routine events in the agency, it is likely that the matching meetings would be found to conform to some kind of typical phasing structure. If we take as read the rational and functional link between the structure of matching and its purpose, then the phases into which it falls provide a resource from which the purposes of the matching activity studied can be inferred..

Speech exchange systems in institutional talk

Turn-taking is the basic building block of the structure of any interactive talk. Change of speakers is not automatic but involves intentionality; it is "actively managed through talk" (Gumperz,1992; 304) and is easily recognisable in any stretch of talk..

In some institutional contexts turns at talk are *pre-allocated* in explicit procedures. Court-room talk, for example, is an example of a highly structured and pre-allocated system of speech exchange. The order of speakers is pre-determined by the explicit rules of due process and courtroom procedures and is tightly managed by the presiding judge and court officers. The rules and management structure in this setting not only prescribe the order in which the various role incumbents may speak but also prescribe the categories of utterance they may make (Atkinson and Drew, (1979).

In other settings, turns at talk may be *locally* managed in that they are implicitly triggered by cues in speakers' utterances and tacit understandings of when it is appropriate to speak and when to listen. The exchanges following 999 calls are an example of this for, although the emergency worker may have certain information to obtain and be trained in obtaining it, the actual process of the interaction relies on both parties reading the cues and appreciating the unspoken rules of turn-taking effectively (Zimmerman, 1992). Therapist-client and focus groups discussions are further examples of locally managed interaction which rely significantly on the participants' communicative competence and tacit understanding of the nature of the exchange.

Many types of institutional encounter involve both pre-allocated and locally managed exchanges. A business meeting is a prime example of this in that some parts of the proceedings will be governed by the authority of the chairperson, widely used meeting conventions and a written agenda. The discussion that flows from the agenda, however, will be contingent on the *ad hoc* collaboration between chairperson and discussants in managing their turns (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974; Atkinson and Drew, 1979).

As the basic constitutive mechanism for the organisation of matching talk, evidence of pre-allocated and locally managed turn taking provides a starting point for examining the structure of the matching talk and the changes of phases in it.

Differential interlocutory force and the power of questions

Types of utterance have different degrees and qualities of influence over the progress of talk and a key category in this respect is that of 'adjacency pairing'. The two-part exchanges of an instruction followed by an acknowledgement, an invitation followed by a reply, a complaint by an apology or excuse and a question by an answer are commonplace examples of 'adjacency pairs' (Crystal, 1993). The essence of an adjacency pair is that the first part requires the second part to complete the exchange and satisfy some of the tacit rules which underpin and maintain the stability and continuity of inter-active talk. There is an intrinsic interactional asymmetry in an adjacency pair-type exchange in that the first speaker (complainant, questioner, and so on) creates, through the interlocutory force of their utterance, a 'moral constraint' on the second speaker to reply in the terms they have set. (Sacks *et al*, 1974)

A question is a particularly forceful form of utterance in terms of its moral constraint on the person addressed to respond in its terms and questions are very common in institutional talk. The question selects the topic of the exchange and follow-on questions sustain those elements of it which are to be pursued further. (This is precisely the 'conversational' mechanism employed by the research interviewer to generate the data he or she, not the respondent, seeks.) The effect of questions and follow-on questions is thus to

> strategically direct the talk through such means as their capacity to change topics and their selective formulations, in their "next questions", of the salient points in the prior answers. In both ways, [the questioner] may prevent particular issues becoming topics in their own right. (Drew and Heritage, 1992; 49)

Institutional encounters often comprise of predominantly question-answer interactions. The examples of courtroom proceedings, emergency calls and therapy sessions that I have already referred to rely substantially on these to fulfil their objectives as do doctor-patient, social worker- client and classroom teaching among many others. Questions, it could be said, are an important institutional instrument.

Any stretch of talk in the example settings, however, is likely to also include what Silverman (1984) refers to as 'unelicited statements', that is utterances made outside of the confines of an adjacency pairing. These utterances may, as in a discussion, be stimulated by a prior speaker, return to a prior topic or raise a wholly new topic but they do not contain nor are they the result of a tacit obligation. In this sense they are voluntary contributions, whose effect on the strategic development of the talk and its agenda is both less powerful than questions and less constrained than answers.

These three forms of utterance, questions, unelicited statements and answers, can therefore be seen in a hierarchical relationship to each other in terms of their interlocutory force. The distribution of questions, unelicited statements and answers in a particular discursive event reflects an intrinsic division of interlocutory labour. As such, it provides a potent analytic tool for the analysis of relationships between speakers, This is particularly so when interlocutory patterns are considered along with institutional role, as I discuss next.

Speaker rights, institutional roles and power

In ordinary conversation, that is talk which participants experience and take for granted as such, speaker roles (i.e. questioner, answerer, inviter, replier, informer, acknowledger and so on) are usually reversed many times over in a more or less even distribution of speaker rights and obligations. A sustained interrogative contribution on the part of one of the parties to a conversation, for instance, would feel out of place and uncomfortable and would probably be 'repaired' by some device such as a

change of subject or other corrective intervention by one of the other parties. In talk associated with an institutional function, however, speaker roles can and often do remain relatively constant and asymmetrical without disrupting the continuity of the interaction. It is the doctor, for example, and not the patient who puts questions in diagnosis and gives advice in treatment, the teacher not the pupil who asks questions and gives instruction, the chairperson not the minute taker who directs the meeting. Indeed, the continuity and effectiveness of the encounter may depend upon interlocutors remaining 'in role' and communicating their institutional status through their inter-active speech acts. There is, as Heritage and Drew put it, "a direct relationship between status and role, on the one hand, and discursive rights and obligations, on the other" (Drew and Heritage, 1992; 49).

In encounters where only one speaker has an institutional role, the division of interlocutory labour may be relatively straightforward and predictable. In meetings involving participants with different institutional roles this is likely to be more complex. Yet the same discursive, and therefore analytical, principles apply. If discursive rights and obligations are directly linked to institutional role and status, then the distribution of utterance types between speakers and its asymmetries will reveal qualities in the power relations between the institutional roles concerned.

3.6. Summary of Theoretical Framework and The Phases of Analysis

To summarise the theoretical framework of analysis, data that had been collected by qualitative method from the stance of 'an apprentice among experts' were analysed as textual constituents (spoken and written) of an institutional discursive event. The data collected from records, by interview and by observation, were examined with reference to selected concepts from discourse and interactional talk theories. The examination held in mind three related questions as follows,

- what was the origin and context of the practice of matching in the setting?
- what form did the decision making take?
- was this consistent with best practice and the agency's intentions

The analysis took as given a rational link between form and function in discursive events. However, the strength of Levinson's (1992 *op.cit*) theory to this effect lies only partly in the evidence of examples of such talk. It also depends substantially on evidence from other sources about what the purposes of the talk in question are. Courtroom talk, classroom talk, emergency service talk and even the gestalt therapy he discusses in relation to this theory all exist within the context of relatively clear theoretical or procedural frameworks. A difficulty for this study was that it was investigating an institutional activity for which there was, as I have indicated in the previous chapter, very little of this kind of reference material. In their study of doctor-patient consultations, Byrne and Long (1976) employed a model of the ideal consultation process used for doctors in training to help classify the "verbal behaviour" of the doctors they studied, noting where this did and did not conform to the model. A similar method was used in this study with a theoretical model devised especially for the purpose

There was rather more to the use of a theoretical model in this study, however, than simply providing the equivalent of co-ordinates for mapping the empirical data. An important question that the analysis sought to answer was the extent to which the practice concurred with the agency's aspirations for it. Did it, that is to say, ensure primacy for the child's needs when matching placements? The model was constructed with this aim central to it and it was thus reasonable that it should also be used as a comparative quality measure of the practice.

3.6.1 Process of analysis and order of reporting on findings

Once the data sets were complete and transcribed, all the data were screened for descriptive detail of the sample and the setting which are discussed in Chapter 4.

The process of analysis thereafter fell broadly into six phases each distinguished by its focus, the data sets concerned and the way the theoretical insights I have discussed were applied to these. Simple quantitative techniques were used in some phases to enhance or focus the pursuit of qualitative findings. In practice, the phases were not

sequential so much as convergent, work being carried out intermittently on more than one at a time rather as a search party might encircle and progressively converge on a central position. They are, however, described sequentially below as phases I to VI for ease of reporting. Some analytic procedures used in these phases were devised specifically for the study and were rather complex. These will be described in detail. Other procedures were more conventional and will simply be summarised.

Analytical phase I. The agency context of matching

A range of agency documents, including reports on the fostering scheme, general policy statements, and administrative paperwork for the matching meetings, had been collected throughout fieldwork. These were all treated as "evidence of what occurred at some time and place from which the investigator was absent" (Zelditch, 1980; 125) and analysed for what they revealed of the evolution of matching practise. Similarly, the fieldnotes which had been made about bureaucratic procedures, conversations with informants and events that took place in the agency during the term of the study were treated as accounts of phenomena which needed to be "subjected to the same kind of internal and external comparisons [and] treated with the same suspicions" as the formally collected data (*ibid.*). The documentary materials were systematically examined for what they revealed about the historical development of matching practice and its conventions, its current ideational underpinning and contextual issues which may have had a bearing on the nature of current matching practice and the quality of decisions made thereby. The issues identified helped to sharpen the focus of the study and were carried forward in the other phases of analysis.

The findings of this phase of analysis are discussed in Chapter 5, entitled 'Contextual Issues in the Practice of Matching'.

Analytic phase II. The structure of matching talk

The transcripts of the matching meetings were read several times over to get a general sense of the sample before proceeding to a close scrutiny of them one by one. The texts were photo-reduced to provide a wide margin alongside for process and other notes prior to a succession analytic waves made across the data within and

between texts to identify their common structure and content The emphasis in phase II of the analysis was on the overall shape and sequencing of the discussions with a view to making some comparisons between the practice and the ideal represented in the theoretical model.

In their analysis of the structure of GP consultations, Byrne and Long (1976) were able to identify six typical phases within the very varied styles of consultation by tracking and classifying the verbal interventions of the doctors. They chose the doctors utterances as the markers of phase changes because it was this performance that they were particularly interested in but they might equally well have chosen them on the on the basis of the superior speaker rights tacitly accorded to the doctor in the exchange. Similarly, the authority vested by the agency in this study in their matching panels, and particularly in the matching panel chairperson, accorded them implicit and explicit authority over the procedures of matching and it was therefore panel interventions which were tracked first in the search for the typical phases of matching.

All utterances by a chairperson which explicitly directed change of speaker or change of focus (e.g. 'can we ask you, A, to start us off'; 'can we turn now to the matter of X') were marked. The same process was then applied to the utterances of panel members as the second highest authority in the proceedings. A further survey of this kind was made across the utterances of other participants where these had the effect of directing a change of speaker or subject matter (e.g. 'I think we should hear what C thinks of that first'; 'we haven't discussed Z yet').

Once all the separate discussions texts were examined in this way, the markers were compared across the sample and extended to similar junctures or sequences where no explicit directive for a change had been given. The fact that participants could change phase with or without direction was taken to indicate that convention played a part in the common patterns of the discussions.

The second wave across the data utilised the concept of 'communication formats' formulated by Perakyla and Silverman (1991) in their study of AIDS counselling to

help define and describe the various phases of talk. A format in this context is a short, stable pattern of exchange characterised by types of turn at talk and the conversational roles taken by the participants (e.g. questioner- answerer, speaker - recipient). The style of a communication format indicates something of the function of the talk at that particular stage. For example, Perakyla and Silverman found two such formats in the counselling sessions they studied, one they called the 'Interview Format' in which the counsellor was seeking information from the patient and the other they called the 'Information Delivery Format' because involved the counsellor giving advice and information to the listening patient. In 'Interview Format', the counsellor and the patient were aligned as respectively questioner and answerer and the turns were built on the tacit obligation of the patient to answer the counsellor's questions. In 'Information Format', the patient's contribution was not essential for the counsellor held the floor and turns were built on the tacit co-operation of the patient in listening to and silently or monosyllabically acknowledging the counsellor's monologue until the opportunity was given to speak. Other differences in communication format might be manifest in length of utterance, with one participant speaking at length and others only in short utterances (sequences of a classroom lesson, for example).

In applying the concept of communication formats to the analysis of the group discussions in the sample, four particular characteristics were looked for in the talk as follows,

- which institutional roles and conversational roles are involved in this exchange (i.e. panel member, social worker, proposed care and questioner, inviter, answerer, commentator, and so on)

- what type of turn-taking is involved (i.e. question-answer, comment-comment, instruction-response, and so on)

- what appears to be its main substantive focus of interest

- what appears to be the function of this stage in the discussion.

The texts were again compared with each other until common phases were recognised and a typical profile of the task-related shape of the matching discussions began to emerge.

Finally, an attempt was made to induce the general function of each phase in terms of the substantive content that it generated, the resolution it appeared to perform or other purpose it appeared to fulfil in the flow and shape of decision making. The framework applied in this endeavour bears some relation to Foucault's conceptualisation of 'rhetorical schemata', or "relationships of sequence and dependence between statements [or groups of statements] ... whose succession characterises the architecture of a text" (Fairclough, 1992; 46). The aim was to identify the underlying rhetorical drift of the discussions between outset and closure and reveal as must as possible of the implicit rules and conventions that underpinned the 'architecture' of the practice. Points of comparison were then made between the structure of the practice and the theoretical model leading to inferences on the quality of the practice.?

The findings of this phase of analysis are discussed in Chapter 6, 'The Task-Related Shape of Matching in Practice', together with the findings of phase III which is described next.

Analytic phase III. The content of matching discussion

The range of topics which practitioners raised in the discussions was taken to represent the range of subject matter which they typically took to be possible and appropriate within their matching discourse and this was the focus of the third analytic phase. Topics were recorded on their first recognisable appearance in the text of each discussion and assigned to a category according to their apparent meaning in the context of the discussion. The topics were simultaneously assigned also to one of three theoretical categories taken from the theoretical model of matching according to whether they primarily concerned the 'user' (the child, her history, her family and so on), the 'resource' (the proposed carers, their style of caring and skills, their family and its personal dynamics, their home and neighbourhood, and so on) or the 'care

plan' which included any topic which appeared to be related to forming judgements or making plans for the child's immediate and long term future.

Figure 3 below illustrates how the classification and categorisation process was applied to the data using a modified extract from the study data. In the text extract (first column) we see a matching panel member in a single utterance first addressing the child's social worker on a matter of the child's behaviour which she then extends to speculation about the proposed placement. This was treated as referring to two topics, the child's behaviour and the 'future placement', and these topics were respectively assigned to the 'user' and the 'care planning' categories because the speaker is clearly summarising information about the child and looking in it for inferences to draw about plans for the child's future. Before the first question is answered, however, the speaker turns to the proposed carers and asks another, this time about their experience of and self-assessed capacity to handle bad temper in a child. This topic related to the qualities of the resource and was categorised accordingly.

Figure 3. Categorisation of topics

Text	Data-driven classification	Theoretical category
((to child's social worker)) She has a bad temper, you say, is she likely to lose the place in this placement? ((to proposed carers)) Is that something you're used to, that you're comfortable with?	child's behaviour future placement experience of carers	USER CARE PLAN RESOURCE

The illustration in Figure 3 is of a very compacted piece of text in which there are three perceptible changes of topic in one utterance and much of the data was of this kind. However, in other data the speaker would dwell considerably longer on a single topic and speakers would change before the topic did. Also, within a long focus on one topic might be nested small references to others, such as a reference to historical incidents ('child's history') or the way family members related to each other ('child's family dynamics') in the course of talking about how the child conducted herself ('child's behaviour'). Clearly there were points in the analysis where arbitrary

decisions had to be made about the nature and change of topics for, as Sacks (1968) has observed, topics in talk tend to merge seamlessly with each other gathering different nuances and slight shifts in meaning in the process. In these instances, the general rule applied was that if text could be recognised as a topic by the analyst using native competence as a speaker and as a social worker, then it was so labelled.

Once each individual discussion was treated in the way I have described, the categories of topic were compared across the sample many times and revised until they seemed to incorporate all the topics recognised (save small talk between participants which was unconnected with the meeting) as having been raised at least once in any discussion. The object was to capture all the different topics raised by all and any participant in the course of discussion, irrespective of the attention they subsequently received in that discussion. This process produced a list of topic categories to which variable amounts of data were assigned but which seemed to fairly represent the breadth of subject matter which, buy the simple act of bringing it into the frame of the discussion, participants were demonstrating to be relevant to placement matching as they understood it.

The topics were then reclassified according to the number of discussions in which they made at least one appearance. This measure of incidence was used to further develop the profile of the matching meetings and to make general comparisons between the practice and theoretical models.

Analytic phase IV. The priorities of decision making

Having identified the topic content and balance in a quantitative way, the analysis returned in phase IV to a qualitative examination of what the topics amounted to and how they bedded down in the discussions. The analysis proceeded on the basis of earlier findings on the context and structure of the practice with reference to the issue of how child-centred the practice appeared to be. In particular, it focused on the apparent salience given in the decision making to various factors in the case concerned. From this inferences were drawn about the practitioners' priorities when matching placements. In this phase, the theoretical model was brought into

prominence and its decision making criteria posed as a set of standards against which to compare the data..

Further details of the analytic procedure and the findings it produced are discussed in Chapter 7, 'The Priorities of Decision-making in Practice'.

Analytic phase V. The role and performance of participants

The essence of phase V of the analysis lay in the differential interlocutory force of utterances and their potential to reveal relationships of power between participants of a meeting. The focus of the phase was the relative influence over the agenda of discussions of participants as 'Seekers' of placement resources, 'Providers' of the resources and 'Regulators' of placement quality. Having partitioned out talk that was unrelated to the substance of matching, all utterances were assigned to the categories of 'questions', 'answers' or 'comments'. This latter category included all unelicited statements and remarks. Longer utterances could contain all three types of utterance and portions would be assigned to the relevant category. At this level of analysis, some utterances could be seen as equivocal or ambiguous in type. For example, a sentence such as, 'we will have to look at travelling arrangements between the placement and school, won't we' could, as it stands, be classified as a question, answer or comment. If this dubiety could not be resolved then it would be assigned either to the category of highest interlocutory force (questions, in this instance) or assigned to more than one category. Usually, however, the interactional context provided adequate clues to make a clear choice. For example, if the content of an utterance and its speaker related to a prior question, then it was likely to be an answer. If it related to a prior answer, but was not a follow-on question, then it was likely to be a comment. If it preceded an utterance by the speaker to whom it was addressed and produced an answer-like response, it was likely to be a question. Figure 4 below illustrates how this deductive process was applied using the given example utterance in three difference interactional contexts. Three speakers (S1, S2, S3) are involved and the category in the top row of each column applies to the shaded utterance in the middle row.

Figure 4. Categorisations of utterances

	Answer		Comment		Question
S1:	are there any implications for placement arising from the education plan	S1:	her school reports aren't bad but she has missed so much	S1:	
S2:	we will have to look at travelling arrangements between the placement and school, won't we	S2:	we will have to look at travelling arrangements between the placement and school, won't we	S2:	we will have to look at travelling arrangements between the placement and school, won't we
				S3:	yes, it could be complicated

The application of this procedure to the data and the findings it produced are discussed in Chapter 8, 'Roles and Relations in Matching'.

Analytic phase VI. Aspirations and Realities

From the practitioner interviews and the questionnaire which preceded them, the final phase of analysis drew out data on outcomes from the matching practice examined. Two kinds of outcome were considered, that affecting the sample placements and that less directly affecting the perspectives of the practitioners as Seekers, Providers and Brokers. The objective of this phase was to view the quality of the practice from the perspective of its outcomes and highlight the issues raised. The sample placement outcomes were examined in relation to placement outcomes in the scheme as a whole. The perspectives of the practitioners were approached firstly from their responses to certain questions in the questionnaire and secondly from whatever comments they had made their interviews about the scheme and its systems.

The findings of this phase of analysis are discussed in Chapter 9, 'Aspirations and Realities; the outcomes of matching practice'.

Chapter 4.

THE STUDY SETTING AND SAMPLE

4.1. INTRODUCTION

The AFS was based in a large Scottish local authority social work department that will be referred to simply as 'the agency' and was one of several foster care schemes operated through its fostering and adoption unit. The agency was publicly committed to a policy of preventing admission of children to care where possible and placing them in foster care, for preference, where it was not. Residential care was regarded as a necessary provision to continue to have available for young people of twelve years and over but foster care was the preferred form of care for those of this age group who could not be returned home within three months or so of admission. The AFS was the almost exclusive provider in the agency of planned foster placement resources for adolescents and this was the site of data collection on placement matching. The organisation of the AFS and its system of resource allocation and matching are described in section 4.2, The Setting.

The study sample consisted of eight matching 'events', or instances of children and resources being formally matched to each other for placement, that occurred in the AFS over a one-year period. Section 4.3, The Sample, describes the cases, resources, practitioners and meetings involved in each of these events. It was the character of the meetings in the sample that, contrary to its original aim, came to occupy the centre stage of the study and it was the nature of their outcomes that first provoked the question to which the study ultimately addressed itself; what actually happened in matching meetings and why? Section 4.4 summarises the profile of the setting and sample and clarifies the issues that emerged from these to influence a redirection of the study.

4.2. THE SETTING

4.2.1. The Structure and organisation of the AFS

Child care services in Lowlands were organised into three separate sectors of provision; fieldwork services, which were managed through local generic area teams and projects grouped into larger area Divisions; residential and day care services, managed from the agency's headquarters; and family placement services which were jointly managed by the central fostering and adoption unit and the Divisions. The sectors were linked operationally in a variety of ways but development of practice within each type of provision tended to be discrete, following its own traditions and emphases. Each area of provision had a separate training budget and its own referral and allocation system. Substitute care facilities in both residential and foster care sectors were also divided by function according to whether they accommodated children directly on admission (reception units or temporary carers) or provided for planned placements for children who had to remain in care beyond six to eight weeks. The AFS was not only the source of planned foster placements for almost all children of twelve years of age and over, it was also the only substitute care facility for this age-group which practised placement matching as such.

The history and structure of the AFS mirrors the general course of development for specialist teenage fostering discussed in Chapter 2. It had begun experimentally on a small scale in the late nineteen-seventies to place carefully selected young people who had grown up in residential care with equally carefully selected, fee-paid foster carers. In the ensuing years it expanded into a substantial scheme in the agency with its own Co-ordinator and team of professionally qualified specialists and its own procedures for resource management, referral and placement. It provided for a progressively wider range of young people including those who had entered care relatively recently with their ties to their own families still intact. In a report on the AFS in 1985, the Co-ordinator casts a reflective gaze over its seven-year history and notes the impact of the change of clientele. Where originally its carers were being asked to deal with children who had become "institutionalised", who had "difficulties in making attachments" and had had "no family experience" to speak of,

> "the majority of young people being placed now with [AFS] carers have been in care for less that 18 months and a considerable number are now placed within 3 months of coming into care. The main problem to be dealt with now is [sic] the relationship difficulties between young people and their natural family. This in some respects is a much more difficult task. The number of natural families involved in placements continues to increase and carers are being prepared more than ever now to work with natural families as this is the live issue for the young person. We do not accept carers into the scheme unless they are willing to work with natural families"
> (Annual Report on the AFS, 1985; 4 - 5)

The focus of the scheme had thus changed radically since its inception. It had begun with the intention of providing what Thoburn (1989) has defined as 'parent-substitute' placements, in which children are given an experience of a quality of family they have not had in the past. It became a provider principally of 'parent-supplement' placements that have the more complex aim, Thoburn explains, of helping a young person "eventually move back home or on to independence while retaining the support and love of the natural family". Carers in such schemes required to have skills "in communicating with natural parents, and conciliating between parents and children" as well as the ability to provide basic care and help to the young person her or himself as an individual (*op.cit*; 94-95) and clearly the relationship between the child and the carers is a very different one to that where foster carers effectively become the sole parent figures.

With the introduction of Fostering and Adoption Panels under the Boarding Out and Fostering of Children Regulations 1985, the AFS was partially integrated into the fieldwork Divisions, each of which ran its own fostering and adoption panel. The specialist AFS staff were managed jointly by the area Divisions and the central Fostering and Adoption Unit and the scheme became a mainstream provider of planned foster placements for adolescents. By the end of the nineteen-eighties, the scheme was catering for around nineteen per cent of all twelve to seventeen year olds in care or under supervision in Lowlands at any one time. Figure 1 below shows the distribution of boys and girls between the various types of placement, including placement at home, at March 1990.

Figure 1. Children aged between 12 and 17 years in the care or under supervisions in the agency at March 1990 by accommodation and sex

Accommodation Type	Boys		Girls		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
At home, or with relatives, or with friends	215	45.4	147	46.4	362	45.8
In foster care	91	19.2	61	19.2	152	19.2
Other accommodation in community*	2	.4	6	1.9	8	1.0
In children's home	77	16.2	59	18.6	136	17.2
In residential school	65	13.7	20	6.3	85	10.7
Other residential**	24	5.1	24	7.6	48	6.1
Totals in foster care as percentage of all substitute care	–	35.1	–	35.9	–	35.4
Totals	474	100	317	100	791	100

(Source = agency statistical records)
** Includes supported lodgings, pre-adoption placements and private foster care.*
*** Includes hostels, hospitals, youth treatment centres and secure accommodation.*

Although there were more boys than girls in the care or under the supervision of the agency they were equally likely to be placed in foster care and the majority of these placements would have been made through the AFS. For both sexes, the proportion of those in foster care as a percentage of all children under supervision or in care and as a percentage of children in substitute care of some kind was broadly the same. Foster care accounted for thirty-five per cent of substitute care placements for adolescents at March 1990 and the equivalent figure for 1989 was thirty four per cent. These figures compare well with national figures reported by Rowe, Hundleby and Garnet (1989) who found that foster care accounted for only fifteen per cent of adolescent substitute care placements in general and an average of twenty-five per cent of placements in authorities with specialist adolescent schemes.

The specialist AFS staff working from the fieldwork Divisions were referred to by two names, scheme 'organisers' and 'carer liaison workers', which reflected their two principle areas of responsibility. As organisers they advised and assisted local social workers in making applications for placements through the scheme and generally contributed to the running of the scheme by the central fostering and adoption unit. As carer liaison workers they were individually responsible for about twelve of the AFS resources in the Divisional area, providing the carers with advice and support during and between placements and compiling with them the reports for their annual

or interim reviews. Divisional specialists also assisted with carer recruitment although primary responsibility for this remained with the centre. The preparatory training which all AFS carers received, based on the National Foster Care Association's 'Challenge to Care' programme, was also organised by the central fostering and adoption unit.

With the partial devolution of the AFS to the Divisions, three of its functions passed to the Divisional Fostering Panels; approving resources for the scheme, approving referrals to it, and matching referrals and resources for placement. Only the first of these was required to be directly located with Fostering Panels by the 1985 Regulations (Regulations 4-6). Responsibility for referrals and matching rested with the care authority as a whole and the delegation of these to fostering panels was optional (Regulations 10-16). It was the view of the agency at the time, however, that approval and matching of AFS referrals, and indeed those for all planned foster care, needed to be brought in line with practice in the field of adoption where for some time panels of independent representatives had been interposed between resource seeker and provider in order to make decision making more objective and child-focused. The matching meetings organised by the Fostering Panels were seen as a crucial element in a needs-led approach to the placement of children and no placement could begin until a matching meeting had recommended that it should.

4.2.2. The system of resource allocation and matching .

Crucial as they were, matching meetings were only part of the system by which a particular placement resource was allocated to a particular child and the distribution of AFS functions between central and local units of the agency made for a rather complicated and attenuated process of placement. The decision to refer a child for a placement in the scheme would usually be made at one of the child's six-monthly child-in-care reviews which the child and parents would both be invited to attend. Thereafter, there were seven further decision-making stages that had to be negotiated in a variety of locations before a placement could officially begin. These stages are

shown in the first column of Figure 2 below alongside the approximate time periods between them, their location and the nature of the decision to be made.

Figure 2 System of referral, allocation and placement through the AFS

Stage of process	Approximate average period between stages	Where and by whom decisions made	What decision made
Referral to AFS		Child-in-care review meeting	To refer for AFS placement
1 Approval of referral	*1-3 weeks after referral*	Foster panel in area of referral with presence of referring social worker	To register child for AFS To seek further Information. Not to register child for AFS
2 Preliminary Linking	*2-4 months after referral*	Resources meeting at centre attended by AFS specialists.	Preliminary allocation of resources
3 Linking meeting	*1-2 weeks after preliminary linking*	AFS Carers' home by carers, liaison worker and referring social worker	Feasibility of placement in principle
4 Matching meeting	*1-3 weeks after confirmed linking*	Matching Panel drawn from Foster panel responsible for carers, attended by carers, liaison worker, referring social worker and usually child's current carer	Whether proposed placement should be recommended.
5 Approval of placement.	*Within 1 week of matching meeting.*	Divisional Director alone	Endorse/ reject recommendation and authorise placement accordingly
6 Placement introductions	*1-3 weeks after matching*	Carers home, involving carers, referring social worker and child, and possibly also child's parents	Whether child will settle in and be committed to placement.
7 Contract meeting	*3 months after placement*	Carers home, involving carers, liaison worker, social worker, child and, ideally, parents.	Agree and sign terms of placement.

The first stage was the referral approval meeting of the fostering panel in the division where the child's referral originated. The referring social worker would attend this meeting without either child or parents and after discussion of the case, the panel would decide whether to approve the referral, seek further information, or recommend an alternative course of action. The second stage was the 'Resources Meeting'. This was convened by the AFS co-ordinator each fortnight and attended only by the AFS specialists. At the meeting, referrals were preliminarily 'linked' to available resources and it was exceedingly rare, according to the study's informants, for a referral to be linked with more than one resource or a resource with more than

one child. Exceptions might be made for very hard to place children or for sibling groups but the generality of children referred to the scheme were allocated one resource to be pursued through the remaining stages of the process. The basis for preliminary linking was the urgency of need, assessed from the briefing each AFS specialist would have had on referrals from their area, the location of the resource, in accordance with the general aim of placing as close to the child's home as possible, and the age and sex of the child. Carers were generally approved and classified for one or other sex of foster child and some were limited to the younger end of the twelve to seventeen age-range for which the scheme catered.

The third stage was the formal linking meeting between the child's social worker, the prospective carers and their liaison worker, usually in the carers' home, at which the feasibility of the linked placement was considered and a decision in principle made about the commitment of the parties to it. Together, the two linking stages can seen as the process of 'eliminating crude incompatibilities' between child and resource which Shaw and Hipgrave (1983) suggest is all that can be done until child and carers meet each other and make their own assessment of whether or not they are matched. In the AFS, however, the final assessment was made at the matching meeting which was convened once the placing social worker gave notice that formal linking had proceeded satisfactorily.

The matching meeting was the fourth stage in the process and was convened by the responsible Fostering Panel on request from the social worker once a successful formal linking meeting had taken place. The Fostering Panel would appoint a matching panel chairperson and at least two other members from its ranks who had no direct responsibility for the case or the carers and the other participants, the carers and their liaison worker and the child's current carer, would then be notified. It was at this point too that the child and parents would first be informed that a resource had been identified. The meeting, or more specifically its panel, was charged with making one of three recommendations to the Divisional Director about the proposed

placement ; that it was matched, that it was not matched, or that the decision should be postponed while further information was sought.

Matching meetings did not officially decide upon a placement but, as I say, made a recommendation on it which then had to be authorised by the Director of the Division in which the meeting had taken place, thus adding a fifth stage to the process. Provided that the authorisation was given, the sixth stage would be entered into, the stage of placement introductions. In this, the child would encounter her/his prospective AFS placement directly for the first time and her/his own response to it would be informally tested in a series of short meetings followed by overnight stays with the carer family. Finally, some three months into the placement, a contract meeting would be held between the carers and their liaison worker, the child, and the placing social worker. The child's parents would be invited also but their absence would not prevent the contract meeting going ahead and deciding the terms to which all the parties, including the parents, would be required to give their signature. Only at this point would the placement be considered to have officially begun.

The process of resource allocation and matching in the AFS was, thus, an elaborate and protracted one. Furthermore, between the formal stages there might be any number of informal meetings between the social worker and the scheme specialist, in both their organiser and carer liaison capacity, to discuss the case and the state of resources. Even if the process went smoothly and quickly through its various stages, a minimum of thirteen weeks was likely to pass between the child's referral and introduction to the placement selected for her/him. It would be a further three months before the placement was firmly committed to that child with a placement contract. The process might take considerably longer than this if resources were unavailable or the child was found to be hard to place even among the specially recruited carers who provided the scheme's resources.

On the face of it, however, it appeared to be a very plausible and thorough mechanism for quality control over the appropriateness of an allocated resource for a

particular child. Only if the nature of a referral had been found by a Fostering Panel to be an appropriate one for the AFS would it proceed for preliminary linking with a resource. Only if this linking was agreed to in principle by resource seeker and providers would the case proceed to formal matching. No placement could begin until a matching panel had recommended it and the Divisional Director had endorsed their recommendation. Only after a period of at least three months would the placement be considered settled enough for a contract to be signed. And before any of this could happen, the resources themselves had had to stand the test of Fostering Panel approval and review.

The matching meeting was, theoretically at least, a pivotal stage in this quality control system for it was here that a prospective placement was formally subjected to scrutiny by an independent panel and a judgement made about it. By virtue of the statutory responsibilities delegated to the matching panel under the Boarding Out and Fostering of Children Regulations and the policy of the agency itself, the panel's judgement should centre on the welfare interests of the child and the extent to which a placement was consistent with these. It was this function of matching meetings that commended them as the central reference point around which to arrange data collection both in the original research strategy for the study and in its modified form.

At the same time, the judgement panels would have to make about a placement would have to be made with only one resource choice to accept or reject. From the stage of preliminary linking onwards, all discussion about a prospective placement centred on the one resource that had been identified, in very broad terms, as probably being suitable for the child in question. What the process of matching clearly could not involve in these circumstances was a comparison between more and less appropriate resources for the child. It would have to be a different process of assessment altogether. The theoretical model of matching developed in Chapter 2 was designed for precisely this kind of situation. However, whether the practice resembled the model in any way was something that the study had to discover for itself, for there was no documentary evidence to indicate what did or was expected to

happen in the meetings. For all its elaborate superstructure, the content of matching in the AFS was quite obscure to all but those directly involved in it; hence the change of tack in the research strategy to focus in on the practice and explore what its practitioners were actually doing.

4.3 The Sample

As explained in the previous chapter, the method of sampling aimed for both typicality and diversity in the matching events selected and these became the more important characteristics. The account of the sample that follows is intended to demonstrate both these qualities and to introduce details that are variously referred to again in subsequent chapters.

During the twelve months in which data was collected for the study there were a total of two hundred and thirty three children between the ages of eleven and eighteen registered with the AFS. Just under half of them (109) were girls. Figure 3 below gives a breakdown of the girls' registrations according to whether they concerned girls who were already in placement at the start of the period and remained so throughout ('in placement'), withdrawn at some point during the period without having been placed ('withdrawn'), remained on the register but reached the end of the period without having been matched to a placement ('un-matched') or were matched to a placement at some point during the period ('matched').

Figure 3. Girls on the AFS register mid-November 1989 to mid-November 1990

	N	%
Total girls on register,	109	100
of which,		
In placement	44	41
Withdrawn	9	8
Unmatched	21	19
Matched	35	30

As we see from the last row in the table, just under a third of the girls registered with the AFS were matched to placements during the relevant period. The study sample comprised of eight matching events (i.e. instances of a child and a resource being

matched to each other) which were drawn from this 'matched' cohort and which amounted to slightly less than a quarter of it.

The family backgrounds, care careers, and the intentions for the placements of the girls in the sample are summarised in sub-section 4.3.1, followed by a brief summary of the findings from the comparison made between the cases of these girls and the full cohort of girls registered with the scheme during the same year. Further details on the cases are provided Appendix B.1 at the end of the thesis. The resources with which each of the sample girls was matched are briefly described in section 4.3.2 and further details on these are provided in Appendix B.2. Case files were not consulted in the study and individual files on the resources were not kept by the agency. The data referred to in this part of the chapter is therefore limited to what could be gleaned from the background papers used in matching meetings, the transcripts of the meetings themselves and the transcripts of the practitioner interviews.

The practitioners in the sample consisted of the social workers seeking resources for children, the carer liaison workers responsible for the provision of the placement resources being matched and the chairperson of the panel presiding over and regulating the matching process. At points throughout the thesis these practitioners are referred to also by role group as 'seekers', 'providers' and 'regulators'.

A short self-rating questionnaire was completed by each interview subject prior to the main interview and the findings from this, together with fieldnotes, provide the source data for the characteristics of the practitioners which are discussed in section 4.3.3. It was beyond the scope of this study to examine either the carer or the client perspective on placement matching in the AFS.

Nine matching meetings were studied relating to the eight matching events as the first event involved two meetings before a final decision was made. The general characteristics of the meetings, their location, the number and type of participants who attended them and their outcomes are detailed in section 4.3.4.

4.3.1. The girls' cases

The descriptive data on the girls in the sample which is summarised in the following paragraphs is set out more fully in Appendix C.1. part 1, where table 1 relates to the girls' family background, tables 2 and 3 to their care careers.

Family background

The family backgrounds of the girls in the sample appeared to conform to a typical profile for children in care, characterised by loss of and separation from significant people in their lives, broken and reconstructed families, strained and sometimes violent family relationships, lone parenting, family poverty and ill-health (Milham *et al.*, 1986; Packman, 1986; Bebbington and Miles, 1989). Only one of the sample girls was living with both parents on admission to care and they separated soon afterwards. Being in care for these girls also meant separation from siblings despite, in one case, the girl's brother being in care too. Most of the girls' families relied on Income Support and only one lived in a house which they owned. The circumstances of the girls in the study sample made a sharp contrast with those of the foster families with whom they were to be matched, as we shall see.

Care profiles and careers

Again, in the care careers of the sample girls, we see a familiar picture of children in care, with problems being experienced in several aspects of their lives and, for many of them, the experience of care earlier in childhood being repeated in adolescence. (Fisher *et al*, 1986, *inter alia*). All had some involvement with agencies such as the Children's Hearing System, Educational Psychology or specialist health provision in addition to their involvement with the social services and only two had not been in care before.

The majority of the girls were in care under voluntary provisions at the point where they were registered with the AFS. In this respect, they resembled the girls in Packman's (1986) study of care entrants who were predominantly in care under voluntary provisions. The duration of the girls' current care episodes ranged from

two to twelve months and for five of them it had been spent in the same placement. One poor child, however, had experienced eight moves of placement in seven months.

The girls spent between two weeks and ten months in care before being referred for an AFS placement and they waited on the register between four weeks and nine months before being matched for one. An average wait time of two months for placement through the scheme had been quoted to the study by the scheme co-ordinator but this clearly masked a very wide variation.

Reasons for and objectives of placement

The reasons why a placement was necessary and what it was intended to achieve were often unclear clear in the background papers used at matching meetings and I shall be discussing this further in the next chapter. However, the practitioners were asked in interview about the reasons for and objectives of placement in the study interviews and there was some discussion of them in the meetings. Figure 4 below tabulates the essence of the reasons and objectives derived from this data in each case. The girls are identified in the first column by the number given to the matching event in which they were involved and a pseudonym; their age is given in italics. The principle circumstances that led to their referral for placement are then noted beneath. The second column notes the principal objectives for placement derived from the source data. In the third column I have assigned general placement categories derived from Thoburn (1988) and Rowe, Hundleby and Garnet (1989). Thoburn has classified substitute care placements as either 'parent substitute', in which natural parents play either a minor role or none at all, or 'parent supplement', in which the objectives include the maintenance of active natural family involvement and even shared care. Rowe *et al.(op cit.*) devised a list of nine broad foster placement objectives which they piloted and then used in their questionnaires to social workers about outcomes. The combined categories provide a simple basis for comparison within the study sample and between this study's findings and others and a list of the

categories is provided in Appendix C1. Part 1 in the table 4 from which figure 4 is derived.

Figure 4. Reasons for, terms and objectives of and category of placement (after Thoburn, 1998 and Rowe, Hundleby and Garnett, 1989)

Child and main circumstances leading to AFS referral	Terms and principle objectives of placement	Placement Category
1) LESLEY *(12y 8mo).* Child and younger brother abandoned, mother (lone parent) depressed and no longer able to care for. Behaviour problems.	Indefinite. Throughout childhood. Provide secure and stable home throughout remainder of childhood. Contact with family restricted and closely monitored.	Parent substitute for care and upbringing and treatment (behavioural).
2) WENDY *(15y 8mo.)* (Lone parent) mother refuses to have child at home feeling that she is beyond her control. Learning difficulties.	Until aged 18yrs. Assist child with personal development towards independence. Contact with family by clear arrangement.	Parent supplement as bridge to independence.
3) MOLLY *(13y 8mo.)* Family breakdown, mother setting up new home with new partner to which Molly expected to return soon. Some school and emotional problems.	Six month, renewable placement. Provide stability and security for Molly and a period of respite for mother prior to being reunited in new home. Shared care with mother . Regular arranged family contact.	Parent supplement for temporary care.
4) CHRISTINE *(13y 11mo)* Family instability, erratic quality of care and control for children. Voluntary status of care converted to compulsory contested. by parents. Current AFS placement irretrievably breaking down . Behaviour problems and possibly past sexual abuse.	Indeterminate length of placement for security and consistency of care and control pending more satisfactory conditions for child's return home. Parental contact closely monitored.	Parent supplement for care and upbringing and treatment (behavioural).
5) LINDA *(15y 1mo)* Voluntary reception into care following school, family and personal problems. This converted to compulsory care by Children's Hearing against recommendation of social worker.	Placement possibly to end of schooling to provide emotional and day to day stability and support for schooling. Unlimited family contact .	Parent supplement for care and upbringing and possibly bridge to independence.
6) LAURA *(14 y.)* Voluntary reception to care following home and school problems. School exclusion. Assaults and threats by step-father made home unsafe.	Indefinite term of placement to provide child with safe, secure and stable home base from which to maintain contact with mother and siblings.	Parent supplement for care and upbringing.
7) MELISSA *(13y 7mo)* Unstable family history. Breakdown in relationship between child and mother. Some school problems.	Indefinite term of placement from which to assess and work on family problems. Care and control appropriate to age.	Parent supplement for care and upbringing and assessment.
8) CAROLE *(13y 7mo)* Child refusing to return home, parents (mother and step-father) equivocal. Reasons for family rifts unclear, but history of instability and psychiatric involvement in family.	Indefinite term of placement to provide child with stability and security and allow situation at home to be further investigated and resolved. Return home ultimate goal.	Parent supplement for care and upbringing and assessment.

Almost all the sample placements (seven of the eight) were intended as supplements to the child's family relationships and were to involve the child's own family to some degree. In one case care was to be shared with the child's mother. In all cases, the social worker was looking for a greater degree of security and stability in the child's life than she had experienced hitherto either to allow work to proceed towards the child's return home or to provide the child with a settled home base from which to continue education or prepare for independence. Two of the placements were

intended also to provide some measure of treatment for behaviour problems and another two had assessment of family relationships as an additional objective. With the exception of the quasi-adoptive placement in event 1, that in event 2 which was hoped to last until the girl was eighteen and that in event 3 which was intended to be short, definite terms for the duration of placements were not made.

The notes in Figure 4 inevitably over-simplify the circumstances of each child that led to their AFS referral. Short case summaries have therefore been provided in Appendix C.1, part 3 for each of the girls in the sample using only the data available in the background papers and transcripts. The case summaries deliberately emphasise their differences and show something of the variety of circumstances and need which should, if their matching meetings followed the principles of underpinning the theoretical model, have had a pronounced bearing on the decision that was made on their behalf.

The sample girls compared with all girls registered with the AFS at the same time

The sampling of cases for the study did not attempt scientific representation of the generality of girls registered with and matched within the AFS, merely cases that were typical of the scheme. A study of records on all girls registered with the AFS during the same year as the sample girls then made it possible to confirm, in broad terms, just how reflective the sample was of girls matched through the scheme in general. Three cohorts were compared; all the girls on the register during the year when the sample was compiled ('All girls'), those girls which were matched and placed during the year ('Placed girls'), and the study sample of eight cases in which the girls were also matched and placed ('sample girls'). The variables selected were those on which records were kept with a sufficient degree of consistency to permit comparison between the cohorts. These were the girl's age when she was matched to an AFS placement', the statutory basis of her care at the time, her temporary care placement at the point of matching, the period she had spent in care prior to registration, the period of time which elapsed between registration and placement, and the number of placement changes recorded for the child after her registration.

The detailed findings of the comparative survey are tabulated in Appendix C.1. Part 2.

The findings of the comparison showed the study sample to be a fair reflection of girls' referrals in general and referrals resulting in placement in particular. The mean age of the sample girls was very slightly lower by a matter of months than that of all girls and placed girls but the general age profile of the sample was commensurate with the norm for the scheme. There were slight differences between the sample group and the other cohorts with respect to care status and the length of periods in care prior to registration. Also, a higher proportion of the sample girls were in voluntary care and they had spent six weeks less in care on average before registration than other groups. The differences were slight, however, and unlikely to set the sample cases as a group apart from the generality where the process and content of matching were concerned.

An issue highlighted by the comparison was the extent to which placement moves and previous placement breakdowns were under-recorded in AFS central records. Molly, in sample case 3, for example, was listed as having had no placement changes yet it became clear in the interview with her social worker that she had three during the current care episode. It was Lesley, the youngest girl in the sample group, who experienced the extraordinary eight moves of placement to which I earlier referred. Four of these changes occurred whilst waiting for an AFS but only one of them was noted on the central records. Although Lesley's was an extreme case, placement instability was not at all unusual for girls in the scheme. The mean number of placement changes within the current episode to the point of matching was 1.2 for all girls registered, 1.4 for all girls placed in the year and slightly higher at 1.5 for the sample group. Successful matching would lead to a further change of placement, from the temporary to the planned AFS one, and if this failed to establish there was no guarantee that the girl would return to one of the placements she had had before.

4.3.2. The resources

The descriptive data on the sample resources available in the background papers and the tape transcripts fell broadly into two categories, the carers' family composition and circumstances and their qualities as a care resource. In both categories the data was limited and sometimes imprecise but it provided some definition of the quality of resources to which the sample girls were matched and the potential risks and benefits attendant upon this. . The data summarised below is set out more fully in tables 10 and 11 in Appendix C.2.

Carer family structure and material circumstances

As a group, the carer families had a more stable history and were materially better off than those of the girls. All were headed by two, married parents and in only one case had a parent been married before. Agency policy stipulated that the main carer must be available at home for the children and in all these families the main carer was the woman. Only three of them worked outside the home and then only in a very part-time capacity. The man was the principle family breadwinner.

Too little information was available with which to describe the carers' income levels but the approximately £4,000 fees per child for AFS fostering would have added to whatever other income they had. All but one of the carer families lived in rented accommodation, Council owned in most cases, which suggests that these families were probably not particularly wealthy. Consistent with the general geographic distribution of resources for the AFS, the majority of the sample was situated in the landward divisions of the agency.

None of the families had more than two children but in most cases (five of the eight) one at least of the children was at or near the same age as the foster child. In five of the families both the carers children were male.

The qualities of the resources

The qualities of resources on which it is possible to comment at this stage are the number and type of placements provided, the length and nature of the carers'

fostering experience, and the particular competencies and skills with which the carers were attributed in their review reports.

Most of the resources were approved for foster girls only and three of these provided two placements. Two resources were available to either sex of foster child. Since only three of the carer partnerships had daughters of their own, one of whom was still a baby, few had personal experience of raising girls. The majority had gained their direct experience of caring for teenage girls exclusively by fostering them.

The majority of the carers had been fostering for at least four years and had fostered at least four children during that time. In this respect they were apparently more experienced than the specialist foster carers surveyed by Berridge and Cleaver (1987). However, one set of carers in the study sample had had no previous experience of adolescent fostering and another had had only one long-term adolescent placement.

The literature provides very little information on the background of carers who provide specialist adolescent foster placement and there is therefore no basis on which to assess how the resources in the study compared with those for adolescent fostering in general. The central records kept by Lowlands on its own resources were very rudimentary and no comparison could be made either between the sample resources and those in the scheme as a whole. It can be probably be assumed with some safety, however, that those of the sample carers who had been in the scheme for several years, the vast majority of them, had consistently met the standards which the scheme applied and were representative in this sense.

4.3.3. The practitioners interviewed

A total of twenty-two practitioners were interviewed for the study, all professional employees of the agency. They comprised of three groups, each central to the process of placement through the AFS and each representing one of the three sets of interests

which were brought together by it, those of resource seeking, resource providing and placement oversight and regulation.

The resource seekers were the social workers for the children being matched and were predominantly main grade generic fieldworkers some of whom had their caseloads weighted towards childcare work. Two of the resource seekers were senior social workers and one of these worked almost exclusively with children. The social workers were interviewed just after the matching meeting in which they had been involved and again six to nine months later. In the intervening period three of the cases were transferred to new workers and in these cases the respondents to the first and second interviews were different. In total, eleven social workers were interviewed in relation to the eight matching events.

Representing resource provision were the liaison workers, the AFS specialists who liaised with, supported, reviewed and helped to recruit and train the carers in the study sample. They were interviewed once, just after the meetings, and there were only five of them in the sample because three were responsible for more than one set of carers.

The matching panels were responsible for ensuring that the agency standards were met in the process of matching and they are therefore referred to as 'the regulators' in this study. Each panel had a chairperson who led the meetings and had the casting vote in any division of opinion over the recommendation which panels had to reach. The chairpeople from the matching panels at the sample meetings were interviewed once after their meetings. There were six of them altogether because two chaired more than one of the meetings. All but one of the chairpeople were officers known as Divisional Assistants who had a service co-ordination role in their Division but few if any line-management responsibilities. This was an important characteristic of panel chairpeople because the panel as a whole was required to comprise of staff who had no direct responsibility for either the child's case or the resource in order that they could judge the proposed placement dispassionately and impartially. The exception

to this rule in the sample was an area social work team manager with general management responsibility for both the social worker and the liaison worker involved who was substituting for the Divisional Assistant who normally took the chair. More will be said about the significance of independent panels in the next chapter.

Immediately prior to the interviews, each respondent was asked to complete a short, self-rating questionnaire to provide a general indication of their perspectives on their own work. The responses to this questionnaire are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Practitioner responses to the self-rating questionnaire.

The variables on which respondents were asked to give a rating on a five-point scale are labelled 1-7 in Figure 5 below which summarises the full findings set out in Appendix C.3. Figure 5 shows only the responses associated with the strongest tendencies (i.e. modal values) in the questionnaire results with respect to each group of participants and each variable rated.

Figure 5. Practitioner responses to the rating questionnaire

Variable rated by practitioners	Social Workers	Liaison Workers	Panel chairpeople
1. Own experience in work with adolescents	more than average	more than average	very experienced
2. How interesting the work found to be	very	very	very
3. How difficult the work found to be	very	very	quite
4. Whether girls easier or more difficult	more difficult	more difficult	easier, more difficult or the same
5. Familiarity with agency policies, procedures and practices	conversant with most	conversant with most	conversant with most
6. Agreement with agency placement policy	agree	enthusiastically agree	agree
7. Quality of agency practice with adolescents	inadequate	quite good	quite good

Practitioners were asked to rate their experience (variable 1) and interest (variable 2) in work with adolescents and all the groups rated themselves fairly highly on both counts. They were also asked to rate the level of difficulty they associated with such

work relative to that with other client groups. The social workers and liaison workers both tended to rate the work as very difficult whereas the panel members were more divided on the issue. Overall, the ratings on these two variables suggest that the practitioners interviewed were a fairly confident and committed group despite the difficulties which the work represented for them.

Asked to compare work with teenage girls and boys (variable 3) the social workers and liaison workers were again in general accord in rating work with girls more difficult. The cases in the sample can therefore be seen to reflect the more difficult end of the spectrum as far as the perception these practitioners had of their work was concerned. The panel chairpeople, who generally had less direct involvement with individual cases, were equally divided on the issue.

Asked to rate the extent to which they were conversant with agency childcare policy, procedures and practices all groups of participants tended to claim familiarity with most, another mark of their confidence in the field of practice relevant to this study. Asked to rate the extent of their agreement with the specific policy on family placement, however, responses were more varied. The strongest tendency amongst the panel chairpeople and the social workers was to express simple agreement with the policy, but there were almost as many in the social worker group who said that they were undecided about it (see Q.6 in Appendix B). The strongest tendency in the liaison worker group was to express enthusiastic agreement with the policy, but there were again almost as many who said they were undecided about it. Rating the quality of agency practice generally with adolescents none of the groups was prepared to give it the highest rating of 'very good' but the liaison workers and the panel chairpeople tended to regard it as quite good or at least adequate (see Q.7 in Appendix C3). The strongest tendency among the social workers, on the other hand, was to rate it as inadequate.

Although the ratings from the questionnaire give some definition to the perspectives of the practitioners interviewed they raise more questions than they answer. It seems

the practitioners generally felt confident, motivated and reasonably well informed in a difficult field of practice of which placement matching was a part. There was a broad consensus of agreement with policy and satisfaction with practice but this was clearly permeated by doubts of some kind on the part of many. There was a suggestion that the practitioners had a different perspective on policy and practice according to their occupational vantage point; that is, that social workers, liaison workers and panel chairpeople saw them differently from their position as resource seekers, providers or regulators in the placement making process. Why this might have been so is an issue that will be taken up in Chapter 9.

4.3.4. The matching meetings

The characteristics of the matching meetings which I shall detail here are their location, in terms of the Division in which they were held, the participants who attended them, some of the basic variations between them, and their outcomes. All these characteristics had some bearing on either the questions the study addressed or the way in which they were addressed.

Location of the matching events

As I described earlier, there was a fostering panel in each of the agency's three city and three landward Divisions and the eight matching events studied had been organised by five of these six panels. No events were notified to the study from the sixth Division. The Divisional location of each event is shown in Figure 7 below and to this is added a category of information which I refer to as 'association'. Cases and resources in matching were sometimes managed in the same Division and sometimes in different Divisions and but matching meetings were customarily organised in the Division with responsibility for the resource. This was an arrangement that became a major issue in the agency during the period of the study because it was believed that it had adversely affected the quality of matching. Matching meetings were subsequently arranged in the Division responsible for the child's case. The significance of this change is discussed in the next chapter. Suffice it to say here that the issue centred on the administrative and managerial association between the panel and the parties to the placement and the data under the category 'association' show

whether the panel in each meeting was connected administratively and managerially with either or both of the resource and the child's case. The change in the arrangements for convening matching meetings ('the relocation of matching' as it was referred to in the setting) was not implemented until data collection was almost complete and only the latter two sample events were affect by it. As Figure 6 shows, however, there were a variety of 'associations' in the sample both before and after the change and this provided for some consideration of the issue which the agency had raised about its own practice to be made in analysis of the meeting data. Some panels were associated with both resource and child, some with only the resource, and the two events taking place after 'relocation' were associated respectively with only the child's case and with both resource and child. The matching events and their related meetings are numbered 1- 8 in Figure 6 as they are throughout the study, with the two meetings within the same matching event identified as 1a and 1b.

Figure 6. Location and association of sample matching meetings.

Event and Meetings	Divisional in which meeting organised	Association
Before relocation		
1a & 1b	Landward D	Resource only
2	Landward D	Resource and child
3	Landward F	Resource and child
4	Landward F	Resource and child
5	City B	Resource only
6	City A	Resource only
After relocation		
7	City B	Child only
8	Landward E	Resource and child

Pre-relocation matching meetings were generally more frequent in the landward areas where placement resources were more abundant and this is reflected in the ratio of landward to city meetings in the sample (5:3). In this respect, therefore, the sample was a fair reflection of practice in general.

In four of the matching events the panel was associated with both the resource and the child's case, in three with only the resource and in one with the child's case only. There were, thus, three categories of meeting in the sample which could be compared in the analysis of meeting data and use was made of this variable in the analysis of

the task-related shape of matching discussed in Chapter 6 and the analysis of participant role performance discussed in Chapter 8.

Participants in and duration of the meetings

The agency required that the matching panels comprise of a chairperson and at least two other members. They were required to try to reach a consensus on the recommendation of the meeting but the decision could be made by a majority if necessary. I have already mentioned that the role of chair was usually filled by a Divisional officer who was not managerially connected with the parties to the placement. The other panel members would normally be generic social workers from the local area teams but it was also considered good practice to include a representative from the local children's homes on the panel. In addition to the panel, the child's social worker was required to attend and ideally would be accompanied by the child's current residential or foster carer. At least one of the carers and their liaison worker were also considered essential participants. Thus, the basic participatory structure of matching consisted of a panel (the 'regulators'), one or two participants concerned with the child (the seekers) and two or three participants concerned more with the resource (the providers). There were several variations on this basic formula in the sample, however, and the more unusual of these are highlighted in red on Figure 7 below which sets out the participants at each of the matching meetings grouped by role.

Figure 7. Composition of matching meeting participant groups.

Participants Meeting No	1a	1b	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
REGULATORS									
Chairperson (Manager)	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Chairperson (Independent)	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1
Panel members (Resource specialist)	2	1	2	0	0	0	1	2	0
Panel member (generic SW.)	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	0	2
Penal member (residential worker)	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0
TOTAL PANEL SIZE	**6**	**5**	**6**	**3**	**3**	**4**	**4**	**3**	**3**
PROVIDERS									
Carer liaison worker	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
AFS Carer (female)	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
AFS Carer (male)	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
TOTAL PROVIDERS	**3**	**3**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**3**	**3**
SEEKERS									
Child's social worker	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Current carer (Children's home)	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
Current carer (Temp. foster)	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1

TOTAL SEEKERS	2	3	2	2	1	2	1	1	2
TOTAL PARTICIPANTS	11	11	10	7	6	8	7	7	8
Duration of meetings in minutes	80	90	65	50	50	32	50	50	50

As we can see from Figure 7, although some meetings had the overall number of participants in common, no two had precisely the same combination of participants. Meetings 1a, 1b and 2 were all held in the same Division where it was the local convention to augment the panel with members of their own team of AFS specialists. (resource specialists on the table). These Meetings also included a residential worker on the panel. The panel for Meeting 5 was the only other panel to include a residential worker but in the panels for meetings 5 and 7 resource specialists had substituted for the generic social workers who normally sat. The panel chairperson in Meeting 4 was the line manager for both the child's social worker and the carer liaison worker whom I referred to in the description of the practitioner interview respondents.

The female carer was present in all the sample meetings and in four of these she was joined by her husband. Meeting 1b had the unusual characteristic of the child's social worker being accompanied by her senior, a measure which had been undertaken to ensure continuity in the case while it was being transferred to a new worker. Three of the meetings in the sample had no current carer present. As we see, in terms of its participants as well as the cases and carers concerned, each meeting was unique.

Matching meetings were by custom allotted an hour in which to reach their decision. The duration of the sample meetings is shown in the bottom row of Figure 8 where we see that six of the meetings concluded their business within the time, one (Meeting 5) doing so in only thirty-two minutes, and one (Meeting 2) running over the hour by only five minutes. Meetings 1a and 1b, however, were very long ones by comparison with the rest and together devoted a total of 170 minutes to the process of reaching a final matching recommendation.

Meeting Outcomes

Every matching event was unique in one or more respects. Notwithstanding some similarities between them, the circumstances of the children and their families, the properties of the resources, the objectives for placement and the precise form of the matching meetings were different in each instance. It was, therefore, a surprising discovery to make as data collection proceeded that the outcome of the meetings was almost completely uniform. Meetings 2 to 8 all concluded that the resource that had been allocated to the child several weeks previously 'matched' the needs of the child that the matching panel had learnt about in detail only at the meeting. Meeting 1a ended with a deferment of its decision while further information was gathered but the second meeting, 1b, concluded with a firm consensus that the resource and child were 'matched'. Figure 8 illustrates the contrast between the diversity of the sample events and the consistency of outcome with a selection of features that set each meeting apart from others.

Figure 8. The contrast between event diversity and outcome uniformity.

Event	Special characteristics	Outcome
1	Family substitute placement sought throughout childhood. Two meetings, both longer than average. Larger than average group of participants and panel augmented by residential worker and AFS specialists. Resource-associated panel.	Deferred then matched.
2	Family supplement placement sought till child independent. Larger than average group of participants and panel augmented by resource specialists. Resource and child -associated panel.	Matched
3	Relatively short, shared-care placement sought. Minimum panel membership. Resource and child -associated panel.	Matched
4	A case of re-matching. Minimum panel membership. Chairperson not independent of case or resource. Resource and child -associated panel.	Matched
5	Family supplement placement sought for indefinite period. Panel augmented by residential worker. Reached recommendation in exceptionally short time. Resource-associated panel.	Matched
6	Panel included residential worker but current carer not present. Resource and child-associated panel.	Matched
7	Panel comprised of chairperson and two resource specialists. Post relocation. Child-associated panel.	Matched
8	Nature of family problems and child's needs uncertain. Placement for assessment and potentially indefinite period. Minimum panel membership. Post relocation. Resource and child-associated panel.	Matched

Once this phenomenon had begun to emerge in the course of data collection further enquiries were made of a variety of agency staff at different levels of seniority. These confirmed that in the generality of AFS matching events, as in the sample, matching meetings tended to endorse the placements they dealt with, very occasionally

requiring two meetings. Only with the most extreme rarity did they recommend that a proposed placement should not proceed because it was not matched. Diverse circumstances routinely led to uniform outcomes in AFS matching, it seemed, and the most probable explanation for this seemed to lie in the process and content of the meetings rather than the cases they dealt with. With this emergent characteristic of the study sample and the curiosity about matching meetings engendered by its agency context, the focus of enquiry turned away from the needs and resource properties being matched for placement to the process of matching itself.

4.4. Summary of the Study Sample Profile and Issues Arising for the Study

Although it had not been designed for this purpose, the sample was likely to produce good data for a study of matching which was both typical in the setting and possibly reflective of features of the practice in specialist teenage fostering more generally.

The AFS appeared to be broadly typical of specialist adolescent foster schemes in its evolution, structure and organisation. It was also an example of a very successful scheme in that it placed in foster homes a higher than average proportion of adolescents in care, catered for a wide range of young people and was equally accessible to boys and girls. The AFS had an elaborate placement allocation system of seven stages extending over a period of at least thirteen weeks between referral and placement and a further three months before the placement was sealed with a written contract. There was a high degree of formal accountability for decision-making within this system and a general intention on the part of the agency and its practitioners that this should centre unequivocally on the needs of the child. None of this in itself validates the scheme as an exemplar of good teenage placement matching practice but it does make the AFS the kind of scheme one would look to find such practice.

The sample comprised of about a quarter of all the matching events that took place for girls in the AFS during the twelve months of data collection. It was compiled to

provide a variety of data within a range that reflected mainstream practice in the AFS and met both objectives. To the extent that it was possible to verify it, the sample group of girls' cases appeared to very typical of those referrals of girls into the scheme which had resulted in placement matches taking place during the year. The practitioners interviewed for the study were routinely and centrally involved in seeking, providing and regulating the matching of placements in the AFS. From their expressed confidence in their child-care knowledge and experience it is reasonable to assume that their matching practice was safely within the margins of normal practice in the setting. The qualities of the sample resources must also be assumed to be within the scheme's normal range since there was no indication that they were not and no comparative data by which to verify this either way.

Diversity in the sample with respect to the cases and resources, the duration of and participation in the meetings and the many other minor features that distinguished one matching event from another produced a complexity in the data that presented a major challenge to analysis. At the same time, it provided a means of informally testing the consistency of findings. If qualities were found to be common to all or most meetings irrespective of differences between them in other respects, then these qualities could reasonably be said to be typical of the practice even though relatively few examples of it were studied.

The study setting and sample were in many ways responsible for the change of research focus. The uncertainty surrounding the precise nature of matching meetings had undermined the study's starting assumption that these were unproblematically the site of matching resources to needs. The early finding of uniformity in meeting outcomes then prompted the rather obvious question of what the matching meetings were really for if the outcome was so predictable. From this followed a hypothesis that matching meetings might be no more than a bureaucratic ritual interposed between the choice of placement and the implementation of it and that the real decision making (and therefore data more relevant to the study) might be occurring elsewhere. However, the review of study data revealed that, while matching meetings

Chapter 5.

CONTEXTUAL ISSUES IN THE PRACTICE OF MATCHING

5.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the findings from the first phase of investigation into the enigma of matching in the AFS, described as Phase 1 in Chapter 3. In this phase, agency documents and field notes were examined to fill out the context and customs of matching practice in the setting. Historical documents, the background papers used in matching meetings and the very structure of matching participation itself were all taken as manifestations of the implicit values, emphases and customs which gave the practice of matching in the AFS its particular character.

Section 5.2 of the chapter discusses findings from an examination of historical documents on the AFS with a view to identifying the source of the conventions by which matching came to be practised. Section 5.3 discusses the content of administrative documents used in support of the matching decision making studied and assesses how it these might have effected and reflected the quality of that decision making. The roles and relations of matching in the AFS are discussed in section 5.4 as they emerged in the participatory structure of the meetings, agency policy documents and practice discourse related to a change made to the structure of matching during the period of the study. Issues of resource demand and supply and their possible influence on the quality of matching practice are examined in section 5.5.

The intention on the part of the agency and its practitioners was to produce a child-centred, needs-led quality of matching and one would therefore expect to see evidence of this in the data. The analysis of contextual data that the chapter deals with began a process that continued throughout the study of testing the empirical evidence of against the rhetoric and aspirations. The concluding section of this

chapter, 5.6, summarises the findings of the contextual analysis and highlights issues which were taken forward in subsequent phases of the study.

5.2. The Elusive Method of Matching; historical AFS documents

In the absence of any current documentation outlining the agency's expectations of matching content and method, a request was made to the scheme co-ordinator for historical records which might shed light on this. After searching through the files, the co-ordinator replied that there appeared never to have been anything even approximating a procedure or guidance for adolescent placement matching either before or subsequent to the implementation of the Boarding Out and Fostering of Children Regulations, 1985. The emphasis in the agency had been on the mechanisms for rather than the method of matching. She also explained that she had talked to specialist staff who had worked with the scheme throughout the transition and that,

> "whilst they do share a similar understanding of how matches were and are conducted, they do not recall or have any written document which outlines a standard procedure. The process used was developed in the early years of the [AFS] by [the then Project Co-ordinator] and group of organisers. This appears to have continued into the setting up of the Fostering Panels in 1985/86."

Practice, then, had evolved over the years of the scheme largely through the creativity and discretion of the practitioners. The procedures they developed were assimilated into agency conventions without ever being underwritten by formal policy. The way matching was done was just the way it was done and one discovered how in the act of doing it.

Between its inception and its integration into the mainstream of the agency, the AFS had produced annual progress reports and these historical documents were examined in an attempt to trace sources of the practice conventions to which the co-ordinator's letter referred. It was not until 1982 that matching began to be mentioned in the reports at all and, at this point, the AFS team was still selecting both carers and candidates for placement itself. It also appeared to be applying very narrow and somewhat exacting eligibility criteria for referrals. The scheme did not exist as a supplier of permanent family placements, the 1982 report categorically states, but as

a source of highly specialised placements for "young people with problems which require work in a family setting". Any young person accepted into the scheme must be "willing to examine his/her situation and define areas he/she wants to work on with the family". Similarly, only those potential carers who were willing to work with a foster child's own parents were recruited to the resource pool. The emphasis on 'working on problems' situates the AFS at this point in its development within Shaw and Hipgrave's (1983) category of 'pure treatment' alongside the famous Kent scheme and its emulators. Whether it also attempted to match the physical, emotional and social 'assets' of the resource with the problem-solving needs of the children, however, is something which the report does not even touch on. Instead, it briefly describes the setting in which matching took place and the role of the carers in the decisions reached. The AFS team met with the referring social workers for up to four children and up to two sets of prospective carers and through discussion a pairing was made between the resources and two of the children. Carers might refuse any of the children but "must be able to give a reason for doing so, i.e. be clear on why they feel this particular child is not suitable in order that another mis-match is not made". Even without the details, this brief account makes it clear that the outcome of matching at this particular stage of its evolution was highly contingent on the carers' views. Moreover, the phrase 'child is not suitable' and the ratio of referrals to resources considered in the matching meetings points to a process in which providers select the child rather than the seeker the resource.

The areas discussed at matching meetings were not dealt with until the subsequent year's report where they are listed as the child's needs, personality, development and problems, the location of the carers' home and the space available in it for a foster child, the position the child would occupy in the carer household, the difficulties the carer family could cope with in a foster child and hobbies and other skills which the family might offer the foster child "outside the family experience" (1983 Annual Report). This agenda is reminiscent of those of the projects discussed in Chapter 1 and seems to be weighted towards a fairly thorough discussion of the child, of which the child's placement needs was one component, becoming rather thin where the particulars of the resource are concerned. Other than its physical properties of

location, accommodation and family structure, the resource-related items on the AFS agenda at this time included only the carer's own assessment of their capacities and what appears to be their prowess in leisure pursuits. The agenda may have become more developed in the actual meetings to include other important considerations such as the carers' personalities, their parenting skills and fostering experience, the regime they offered and their ability to work with the family of origin and with the child on the problems identified, but there is no indication either way in the reports. Taken at face value, the agenda of discussion suggested that the child's circumstances should be the principal topic of discussion and subjected to a measure of scrutiny that the resource need not be. This would be entirely consistent with the process described in the previous year's report whereby the resource providers effectively selected the child. In order to make that selection they would need to know what kind of children they were choosing between but there would not be the same necessity for their own particulars to be similarly laid bare. On the evidence of these reports, it is difficult not to draw the conclusion that placement matching was a rather resource-led process prior to the introduction of the Fostering Panels.

The agency reports ceased in 1985 and the new system of resource management and allocation came into being shortly after. Quality control of the resources became, as a matter of law, the responsibility of more accountable Fostering Panels and matching became the responsibility of a sub-set of fostering Panel members. Prospective carers continued to participate in placement matching but the practice of involving more than one set of carers at a time was abandoned. As foster care became a mainstream provision for all adolescents in the care of the agency, the narrow, problem/treatment-centred eligibility criteria gave way to criteria based simply on age and the need for a foster placement. With all these changes, it was possible that matching itself might have lost some of its earlier priorities and gained new ones. The resource-led emphasis in the earlier decision making may have given way to a more user-orientated approach. An examination of the documentation directly used in the matching meetings studied, however, was not very reassuring on this point.

5.3. The Elusive Method of Matching: current administrative documents

There were two documents, referred to in the setting as 'background papers', which practitioners always used in the course of matching. These were the child's referral form, whose format was designed in the early eighties by the scheme itself, and the carer review report, whose design was more or less contemporary with the advent of the Fostering Panels and applied to reports for all foster carers. For matching, the carer review report was often accompanied by copies of the forms the carers completed themselves when first applying to join the scheme. Other reports on the child might also be included in the background papers but this was not consistent or even common practice. The individual components of the background papers on child and carers had been produced for a variety of administrative purposes rather than directly for matching. However, in conjunction, they covered the categories of information required by the 1985 Boarding Out and Fostering of Children Regulations Schedules 1 and 2 and they were *packaged* specifically for linking and matching. The papers were exchanged between the carers and the referring social worker prior to the formal linking meeting and were circulated to all the participants in advance of the relevant matching meeting. It is appropriate, therefore, to assess the value of their contribution to the matching decision making both as a reflection of practitioner priorities in the process and in terms of their potential influence on proceedings.

No minutes were kept of the formal linking meeting that preceded the matching meeting and matching meetings had no written agendas. The only document to record decisions about the pairing of children and resources was a rudimentary minute made at or after a matching meeting for onward transmission to the Divisional Director and her or his authorisation of the placement. The minutes and background papers relating to the sample events were closely examined for clues about the nature of matching and in discussing the findings I shall deal first with the referral forms, then the carer papers and finally the minutes.

5.3.1.The child's referral forms

The referral form was in four-sections two of which were completed by the referring social worker, one by the child and one by the child's carer at the time of the referral. Over and above the basic details of the child's age, address, and care status, the referral form sought fifty-eight other items of information. Only nine of these appeared to focus at all directly on the kind of placement resource the child needed, however. The other forty-nine questions were more concerned with the kind of child being referred. They sought information on the child's family background, appearance, personality, social life and interests, domestic habits, likes and dislikes, stage of development and a the events in leading up to and occurring after care admission. There were several questions about the child's behaviour and attitude in a care placement, how she related to her carers and whether there were antisocial or irritating habits which future carers might need to know about.

The nine 'resource-related' questions in the referral form are listed in column b of Figure 1 below alongside the respondent to whom the question was addressed in column c. Column a of the table lists, for comparison, the three topic areas included in Thoburn's (1988) recommended placement specification which I discussed in Chapter 1. (The full set of questions on the AFS referral form is given in Appendix D)

Figure 1. Questions on placement requirements in referral form and comparison with Thoburn's placement specification framework

a **Thoburn's recommended specification topics**	b **Questions in referral form**	c **To whom addressed**
In order of priority, which of the child's needs the placement is intended to meet	Are there any geographical or other limitations on a possible placement? What are these?	Social worker
	List the most important problems to be tackled in placement.	Social worker
	Do you think that [foster] care is right for this young person?	Child's current carer
How the placement should reinforce the child's strong points, abilities and interests	In what areas would the placement assist the young person?	Child's current carer
	Is the child committed to a family placement and the work to be done in it?	Social worker
How significant relationships for the child will be preserved and enhanced	Who are the most important people at this time for the young person?	Social worker
	What are the plans for contacts with his/her family during placement?	Social worker
	Who would you like to keep in contact with when you are with the [foster] carers.	Referred child
	What is the long term plan for the young person and natural family as a whole?	Social worker
	Would you like to live in a family setting? If so, what kind of family?	Referred child
	What do you feel about sharing a room?	Referred child

The resource-related questions on the referral forms were scattered throughout its various sections and distributed between the social worker, current carer and child who respectively completed the sections. This made the placement requirements rather difficult to locate. Moreover, when compared with Thoburn's specification topics that stress both needs and strengths, the tenor of those on the referral forms appear rather negative and reserved. They enquire about the child's problems and needs but not strengths and interests. They speak of problems to be 'tackled', which emphasises the process, rather than needs to be met, which emphasises the outcome.

Space was very limited on the referral forms for responses to its questions and requests, even the more complex ones, with the result that responses tended to be very short, generalised and at times rather oblique. This is illustrated in Figure 2 which sets out in full the responses given in the sample forms to the question about the child's problems to be tackled in placement ('X' substituting for the child's name).

Figure 2. Social worker's responses to the request in the referral form to "list the most important problems to be tackled in placement"

Event no.	Response
1.	"Firm limits need to be set. X has never known any security and I suspect very little love. Intensely loyal to mother though she receives no encouragement in this."
2.	"1. To help X understand behaviour and how at times that behaviour can be dangerous. 2. To help her understand the need for rules/ regulations. 3. To help her look towards her future. 4. She needs help to understand what has happened to her family."
3.	"X needs a warm and caring environment where she is not always the centre of attention. The carers will need to be firm as she can be cheeky."
4.	"Relationship with family; peer group relationships; rejection by father."
5.	"Learning how to share feelings. Appropriate adult cuddling etc."
6.	"1. Firm limits on X's behaviour, providing security, stability, but combined with love/ affection. 2. Discussing/ facing up to problems instead of ignoring them/ running away. 3. Schooling i.e. getting back or sustaining mainstream education."
7.	"Improve relationship between mother and daughter, offer caring home where X can learn to respond to this care and work toward responsible behaviour in time keeping."
8.	"At present X does not see the difficulties in her family setting as something she has any responsibility for. She needs to make sense of her position vis-à-vis her family."

The social workers in events 2 and 6 were quite successful in being clear and specific despite having only four lines on the form to do so but their responses had to be foreshortened which left them open to wide interpretation. The social workers in events 4 and 5 exemplify the other polarity in the sample forms, that in which the respondent relied almost completely on the reader's interpretation of what they meant. Reading across all the responses, one gets the feeling of an underlying formula to which all were indexed; firm limits, security and stability, adult affection and guidance. This was probably unavoidable given the constraints of the medium but it allows little sense of the individual child to come through. Indeed, this was the residual impression left by the completed referral forms as a whole. Individual needs and placement requirements could be inferred from the information imparted; the kind of help required with a relationships from a brief description of that relationship, for example, or the need for encouragement for the child in a particular interest from the fact that the interest was mentioned. It was equally possible, however, that such inferences would be blocked by the plethora of descriptive snippets on the child that the forms demanded. The result was a strong impression of the child as a care prospect, or set

prospect, or set of care *demands*, and a very weak impression of the child as someone requiring a certain quality of placement resource.

5.3.2.The carer papers

As I have said, review reports were the principal component of the background papers on the carers but their original application forms were also usually included. The application forms were based on forms designed by the British Association for Adoption and Fostering that Lowe (1990) found to be commonly used in adolescent fostering. They required applicants to answer a series of questions about their and their children's personal lives and personalities, jobs and education, relationships, values and feelings about becoming foster carers and to give some details of their domestic accommodation. In completed form, they were indications only of the carers' potential and if they had been with the scheme for several years some of the information in the original application form could be out of date. It was also, of course, subjective.

The carer review reports, on the other hand, referred to actual experience of fostering in the AFS and were therefore a more accurate and current reflection of the qualities of the resource in use. The reports were written in prose and compiled in consultation with the carers by their liaison workers according to an outline which the agency provided. The outline proposed a summary of the carers' placements to date, comment on their relevant skills, knowledge and strengths and information about any changes in the carer family's social or domestic circumstances which might affect their capacity to foster. It also suggested some comment on whether the resource had been appropriately used, how it might be developed and a recommendation as to whether, for what children, and for how many placements the resource should continue to be approved. The sampled reports interpreted this framework variously and often loosely. Some gave brief details of the most recent placements, others simply a list of all placements in the carer's history. Some went into detail about children placed with the carers, problems they had presented and how the carers had responded to these and others sketched briefly across one or two issues. The reports were addressed to the annual review of resources by the Fostering Panels. They were

not intended as resource descriptions *per se* although, in the absence of anything else, this is effectively the purpose to which they had to be put in matching and they had several weaknesses in this regard.

Firstly, they could be up to a year old and contain information that was incomplete or no longer valid. For example, there was a report in the sample examined which gave the carers' previous address more than twenty miles from their current address and the wrong number of placements they currently offered. Secondly, because the reports were essentially summaries of the evaluation made of the carers they were short on descriptive detail about the resource as a whole. They listed the members of the carer family with the children's ages but tended to say nothing more about the household. The interests and activities in which the carer family and its members involved themselves were rarely referred to and the facilities in or other aspects of the neighbourhood were only mentioned if there had been specific problems in relation to them with a particular placement. At a more personal level, the routines of the household, how privacy, discipline and the meeting of disparate family needs was managed and other aspects of personal care might emerge from the brief accounts of previous placements but they were not consistent topics in themselves.

The third weakness in the reports from the point of view of their use as resource description was their general lack information about the resource's limitations. Problems may be alluded to (*e.g.* "these carers had problems particularly with one of their placements where the child was acting out a lot, but I believe they have learnt from this and have grown into a good and useful resource") but in terms of something which had contributed to the carers' development rather than as important information about the resource itself. Similarly, past placement breakdowns were sometimes noted as an experience for the carers but their circumstances were not detailed (*e.g.* "the placement ended prematurely and they seemed to lose confidence for a while"; "it broke down eventually and they felt very upset when she left"; "it was a difficult placement anyway which they found very taxing"). There was little in this for a seeker or panel to learn about the quality of the resource for matching purposes.

Identifying placement weaknesses as well as their varied strengths is a very important element in the theoretical model of matching. It is only by so doing this that firstly, a proper assessment can be made of the fit between resource and child and secondly, necessary modifications or additions to the placement can be identified. Like the background papers on the child, those on the carers left a number of important gaps to be filled in the course of matching meetings if child-centred, needs-led decisions were to result.

5.3.3.The meeting minutes

The background papers on the child and resource were part of the input to the matching process and their qualities have been discussed in that capacity. The third form of document used in matching was part of its output. I have referred to this as a meeting minute but this is a bit of a misnomer. Few meetings had the services of a minute taker, the study was informed, and more often than not all that could be managed was a brief note of the recommendation reached. Even where more was possible, however, the sample minutes examined suggested that it was not their principle purpose to account for the recommendation and explain the considerations that went into it. Longer minutes tended simply to reiterate the child's circumstances and state the decisions made. Very little indeed was said about the resource and the properties that made it a good match. (No minutes reporting mismatches were seen in the study). Figure 3 provides annotated extracts from minutes in the selection examined which illustrate what seemed to be general traits. The first extract (A) is from one of the longest and most elaborate minutes in the sample and the second extract (B) is from one of the shortest.

Figure 3. Annotated extracts from sampled matching meeting minutes.

Extract A. One of the longest minutes, of Meeting on C-

Following the sederunt list, and a statement of the purpose of the meeting as to "look at the possibility of a match between C- ((the child)) and the carers", the minute goes on to record some of the details of the child C- under the heading "About C--".

The text is further divided into sections labelled "Family Contact", "School", *and* "M- ((the children's home where C is currently placed))". *Under the first of these headings retrospective notes are made about C's irregular and infrequent contact with her family while she has been in care, the sibling rivalry between C and her brother, the parents' negative attitude to the fact of C being in care and to the prospect of a foster placement.. Under the second heading, retrospective notes are made about C's conduct in school and its consequences in exclusion and attributes this to her unhappiness in placement.. The minute adds that C is* "not a great management problem" *and is* "on the whole a pleasant girl" *although* "she is prone to the occasional tantrum", *is plump, does not have many interests, and can* "take a telling and responds well to adults". *The next and final part of the minute is headed* "Conclusions". *It states,*

"It is thought that C could be closer to the Carers' daughter's age psychologically and that there might be some competition although that might not be all bad since it might allow her to be that age for a little while. She is not all that aware of what it is like living in a normal functioning home although she has had previous experience of foster care. If she moves to P- ((town of placement)) it may be right for her to move schools but this will need to be further explored. This would help her to build up a social network in P-. Although this could potentially be a long placement for new carers to take on, the Panel felt that this had the making of a good match and that it should be proceeded with. This placement could be at least 3 years long. Some introductions have already been provisionally set up and will start immediately. "

Extract B. One of the shortest minutes, hand-written 'record of decision' about M-

The complete record reads,

"Decision: approval to proceed despite the strong possibility that placement may not develop beyond introduction state due to issues of authority and control, etc.
Aims of Placement: M clearly needs a 'normal' family experience where she can be helped, if possible, to become the 14yr old girl that she should be. Rehabilitation home is highly unlikely therefore longer term objective would be preparation for independent living"

The minute in extract A indicates that a fairly thoroughgoing change for the child is planned with a move to a new town for possibly three years and a probable change of school. Parental objections are also noted. Yet the minute says nothing at all about the resource other than that the carers were new and, by implication, a largely unknown

quantity. On the basis of the information supplied there appear to be three placement risks in this case; the lack of experience in the carers, the resistance of the parents and the separation of the child from familiar social networks (Tresiliotis;1989 *inter alia*). There may have been good reasons for ignoring these contra-indications, but the minute does not reveal what they were and the panel was evidently confident enough of the Divisional Director's authorisation to set the process of introductions in train before it was given.

All that the minute in extract B conveys is that the panel decided the placement should proceed despite a strong likelihood that it may fail because the child needed a family environment and could not go home. The Divisional Director is apparently being asked to authorise a risky placement without any information about the nature of the risks or the steps that may have been taken to reduce them.

The style of the matching minutes examined was such as to give very few clues about what actually happened in the matching meetings, what the content of discussion had been, and why a particular recommendation had been reached. This was a problem for the study but not necessarily in the setting. If the minutes and background papers were all a Divisional Director had to go on in deciding whether or not to authorise a placement then the quality of decision making at this point would be questionable. However, study informants explained that often a panel chairperson discussed the match personally with the Divisional Director and it was by this means that gaps in information were filled.

5.3.4.The administrative documents, their limitations and the implications for matching

The papers examined were probably no better and no worse than bureaucratic documents in general. The background papers were being pressed into a service, matching, for which they had not originally been prepared and for which they appeared to be ill suited. There is an emphasis, in the child's papers particularly, on the character of the child which is not matched by a similar emphasis in any of the

documents on the character of the resource, almost as if the child rather than the resource were the commodity, and this chimes uncomfortably with the resource-led practice described in the historical AFS reports. Moreover, the background papers and minutes were such that, although a variety of needs and resource properties might be inferred from them, neither was specified clearly, comprehensively or in any detail. The minutes did not remedy this.

The documents only began and ended the matching process, however, and their limitations serve to highlight the fact that matching was primarily an oral practice, something which happened as a result of people talking to each other face to face. In the context of this study, the papers raised questions which only an analysis of what actually took place in the matching meetings could answer. Did the discussion that took place in the meetings focus on the child's placement needs as the papers appeared not to do? Were details of the resource examined in relation to these needs as in the theoretical model? Were potential risks and benefits in the proposed placement fully assessed and were arrangements made to reduce risks and enhance benefits? Were contingency plans made in the event of placement breakdown? These are the questions which were taken into the analysis of the talk data from the meetings and which are addressed in later chapters.

5.4. Roles and Relations in AFS matching

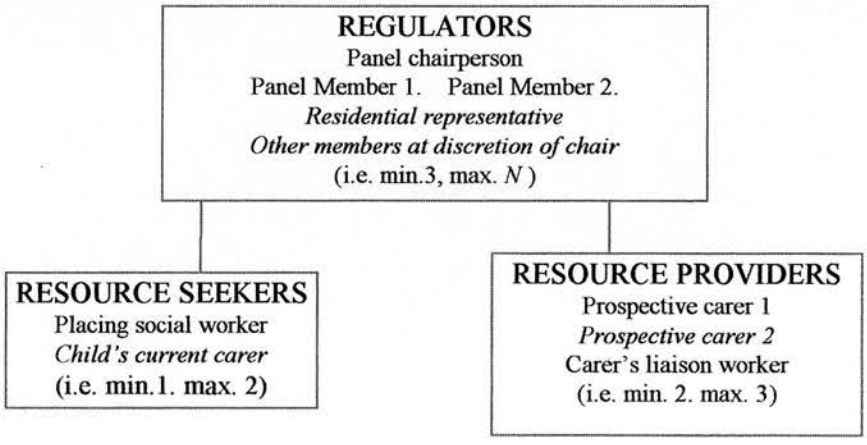
The matching meeting represented the fourth stage in the overall system of resource allocation and placement making in the AFS. It was the stage at which resource seekers came together with resource providers in the presence of the regulators to discuss and validate a proposed placement. Where the agenda and method of matching were implicit, the agency had explicitly prescribed the participatory structure of the meetings when establishing Fostering Panels. The original documents on this prescription were no longer extant but they were referred to by several of the study's informants and there appeared to be little doubt among the participants of the sample meetings as to whose participation was indispensable, whose was ideal but not essential, and whose was not required at all. The aim of the analysis discussed in this

section was to consider the participatory structure of matching and draw inferences about the way its form may have influenced its function. In the course of fieldwork, the agency implemented some changes to the structure of matching meetings and the rhetoric surrounding these changes was taken as an extension of the implied 'account' that the structure gave of the practice.

5.4.1. The participatory structure and implications for the quality of matching

According to the rules that the agency had set down when establishing Fostering Panels, a matching panel should consist of at least three members of the larger panel. One of these would be its chairperson but none should have any direct connection with the child's case or the resource. In addition to the panel, the child's social worker, at least one of the prospective carers and their liaison worker were required participants. The presence of the child's current carers, the prospective carer's partner and a residential representative of the panel was recommended practice but the absence of any one of them would not prevent a meeting proceeding. The child and parents, the users in modern parlance, were not invited to attend. This structure is set out in Figure 4 below with the recommended as opposed to required participants indicated by italics and the participants grouped according to role as resource seekers, providers and regulators.

Figure 4. Basic participatory structure of a matching meeting



**italicised roles are of recommended participants; others are required participants.*

Looking into the relationships behind this structure, there appear to be two particular areas in which it may have influenced the content of matching; the quality of information available to the process of matching and the relative strength of participation afforded the roles of regulator, provider, seeker and user.

In was in the nature of the matching structure that meetings would be well provided with sources of information about and views from the perspective of the resource. As Figure 4 shows, there was always a minimum of two resource providers attending the meetings, one of whom was its direct provider and the other the liaison worker who consistently worked with it. Furthermore, following the setting up of the Fostering Panel, matching meetings were always organised by the Fostering Panel that reviewed the carers rather than that which approved the child's referral. There was a strong likelihood, therefore, that one or more of matching panel members might already have some knowledge of the resource they were matching. The child was a likely to be a lesser-known quantity to the panel and may be represented at the matching meeting by the social worker alone. This may or may not be the same worker who originally made the referral nor yet the same worker who would see the placement through because cases were routinely transferred from secondary settings (e.g. hospitals, specialist units) to area teams and between short and long-terms social work sub-teams. There were several examples of case transfers in the sample. Neither child nor parents were invited to attend matching meetings and only in very exceptional circumstances were they ever allowed to do so. The sources of information on the child were generally fewer and more variable, therefore, and there was no direct equivalent of the carers to voice the perspective of the child and parents.

As we saw, the background papers on child and carers were lacunose in various respects. The child's papers were limited in specifying precisely what an appropriate resource would require to have to meet the child's needs and the carer papers were limited in descriptive and critical material. The availability of first hand knowledge of the resource at the meetings could have been one of the means by which the lack of information about it in the background papers was redressed. Moreover, with such

ready access to whatever details on the resource the panel may require, panel members could concentrate on clarifying the child's placement requirements, assessing the extent to which the resource would meet them and making whatever additional supportive arrangements were necessary. The presence of the providers was, in this respect if no other, a potential advantage to a child-centred quality of matching. However, there were other factors in the structure which may have acted as obstructions to this.

Another important dimension of the participatory structure of matching which may have had a bearing on its content was that of the relative participatory power of the participants. There are two fairly straightforward ways in which participatory power can be assessed, by weight of numbers and by the ability to influence the decisions making. On both variables, the regulators were in the most powerful position. They were the most consistently numerous at the meetings, their numbers rising to six in some of the sample meetings, and they had supreme authority for the process and it's decision outcome. The providers were the next most powerful in terms of their numbers, with the presence of at least two of them being required for meetings to proceed. They were also powerful in terms of their proximity to decision making not only at the matching meeting but also in the stages leading up to and following it. Although their role was limited to some extent when the panel system of matching was adopted, they nevertheless remained party to all the decisions from the approval of a referral onwards. According to agency staff consulted during the study, preliminary linking would not be seen to be complete until the carers selected had agreed to be considered for the child. Formal linking gave them another opportunity to explore and agree to what the placement would entail, matching yet another, and the carers were active parties in the placement introductions and contract meeting. These latter took place in their home.

The seeker role was potentially less powerful than that of the providers for it was relatively marginal at stages before matching and only one seeker was required to be

present at matching. Having made a referral which was accepted, the social worker was then dependent upon the scheme organisers for the initial allocation of the one resource that would be offered, and reliant upon the success of initial negotiations between available carers and their liaison worker before they could discuss a prospective placement in earnest. Decisions up to the point of formal linking had effectively been made by resource providers and the seeker re-entered the process in meetings where he or she may be the only representative of the case present.

While the seeker was marginalised in the early stages of the resource allocation system, the users were marginalised throughout and excluded at crucial points in the decision about where and with whom the child should live. According to the agency staff consulted in the study, social workers were required to seek parental agreement to a referral for placement but, as we saw in the extract from the meeting minute in Figure 2, lack of agreement did not prevent a placement being made. A parental signature was apparently required to the placement contract but the contract meeting could take place with or without their participation. Neither parents nor child were invited to the referral meeting with the Fostering Panel. They would usually not be informed that linking was in process and, although they would be told of the matching meeting once it was arranged, they would be informed only of the location and family composition of the prospective carer family. They only began to learn the details of the proposed resource once the professionals and carers had agreed it to. The child completed a section in the proforma referral papers for the scheme and would usually attend a preparation group where she or he would learn about the scheme and have an opportunity to discuss concerns she or he might have about placement within it. Otherwise, the child's role was no more active and involved that that of the parents. Both were required to wait while placement choice was made by resource seekers, providers and regulators on their behalf.

In the light of this variable participatory power among the active and passive participants of matching, its structure can be redrawn as a hierarchy with regulators at the top, providers on the rung below, seekers on the one below that and users at the

very bottom. The position of the regulators in this hierarchy is entirely consistent with their role. The descending order of providers, seekers and users, however, is more problematic.

5.4.2. Partnership, problems and implications for the content of matching

Partnership between the care agency and its foster carers is a pronounced theme in the literature I discussed in the opening chapter of this thesis and close involvement of carers in placement making is a traditional feature of foster schemes for adolescents (Hazel, 1981; Shaw and Hipgrave, 1982 ; Berridge and Cleaver, 1987; Triseliotis, 1989). As we have seen, carers had once been so involved in AFS matching as to make the final decision about which child would get which resource. The last annual report to be written on the scheme in 1985 delivers among its parting shots the reminder that "the Project families are fee-earning and are doing a specific job of work with adolescents" and must therefore be as closely involved in the decisions about placements as possible.

The role of carers in matching was not without difficulty for other practitioners. The 1984 report on the scheme notes that some social workers had expressed concern that the presence of the carers inhibited "open and honest" discussion. Some of the practitioners consulted in this study also commented on the issue. Talking about aspects of a resource over which they have some concerns could be very difficult in the presence of the carers, they explained, because of the delicacy involved in not appearing to criticise the carers personally. This suggested that the role and status of the providers in matching, given the very personal nature of foster care, restricted the scope of discussion in a very crucial area; that of identifying resource weakness in relation to a particular child's requirements. Nevertheless, the agency apparently preferred to live with these difficulties rather than put the role of the providers on a different footing. The 1984 report's answer to the issues practitioners had raised was to reassert that "It is to be remembered that the carers are colleagues and that their

presence there is essential". The direct involvement of carers in matching was a convention of the practice that was apparently inviolate.

Partnership issues with the child and parents, however, had led to a different outcome. Involving the child and parents in decisions that directly affect them also has strong support in the literature (Parker, 1987; Page & Clark, 1987; Gardner, 1987;Thoburn, 1989; Aldgate 1991), where strong associations are drawn between this and the child's well-being in care. It was agency policy too to "assist families with parenting" in a relationship of "partnership with parents" (Agency Four-Year Planning Statement, 1989). However, the agency had not developed explicit procedures for this partnership in placement making. A small survey of eighty-eight AFS placements, reported in O'Hara and Dewar (1987), found that in barely half of them had parents been actively involved in placement planning for their child, even where 'an active rehabilitation plan' had been in place from the outset. In lamenting this finding, the researchers comment that it could only be improved upon if practice involved "systems, processes and a language that families can understand". There were evidently barriers of this kind in the AFS but there was also the simple fact of parents not being invited to meetings where critical decisions were made. Beyond completing the relevant forms, parents and child were not merely absent from matching meetings, they were distant from the whole process until introductions were set in train.

The exclusion of parents and child from matching specifically was an issue that arose in a fieldwork interview with the Scheme Co-ordinator and she gave three reasons for it. Two of these were intended as protection for the child and parents; to avoid raising and disappointing the expectations of the family if a placement failed to materialise and to protect the child from the weight of responsibility for placement choice. The first reason seems a little academic in view of the propensity for matching to lead automatically to placement and it does not follow from the second, reminiscent of Hunter (1987), that the child should not be present at all. The Co-ordinator herself suggested that "I think it is something we should review". The third reason given for the position of the family had more to do with protecting the content of matching. It was

very important, the Co-ordinator explained, that participants in matching had "a full discussion about the child and family" in order that the panel and the carers could "fully appreciate what they (i.e. the carers) were taking on" and that this would be inhibited if the family were present in person. In other words, it was considered more important that participants felt free to discuss the family than it was for the family to take part in the decision making; the very reverse of the logic applied in the case of the providers.

By treating the issues of carer and family participation in matching differently, the AFS had inadvertently created the potential for a very unbalanced agenda. Discussion could range wide and deep over the circumstances of the child and family but discussion of the resource might be restricted to those matters which others felt comfortable talking about in the carers' presence. In addition to losing the benefits for the child of the family's participation in placement decision making, therefore, the agency was also making matching more difficult for itself by potentially limiting the extent to which placement weaknesses and risks could be examined thoroughly and reduced. In addition, where the perspective of the users could only be conveyed indirectly through the seeker, the providers were present to speak for themselves as they chose.

5.4.3. A question of identity; the liaison worker's role at matching

The factors strengthening the participatory power of the carers as providers in matching were their own presence at it and the presence of their liaison worker boosting the number of people representing the provision. Not only could the carers speak for themselves, they had a professional specialist also to speak for them. Or did they?

I have assigned the liaison workers to the membership category of provider largely on the basis of their routine responsibility for administering the resources and professionally supporting the carers. However, the liaison workers were agency staff with responsibilities to the agency and their colleagues acting in the matching context as regulators and seekers. They were responsible for developing the quality of

resources through training and running support groups for carers. They were responsible for rectifying resource weaknesses through their liaison relationship, for processing the initial stages of formal complaints against the resource and its providers and, to use a term supplied by the study's informants, 'counselling out' carers who would never meet the agency's standards. There was an element of the regulator in their general agency remit. At the same time and in addition to their various functions in relations to resources, they also helped social workers to seek resources by guiding them through the application process, advising them on the availability of resources and taking their placement specification into the preliminary linking process. The liaison workers performed many roles in the course of their duties on the agency's behalf. The question was, which of these roles was dominant in actual matching and how did it affect the balance and content of the process? Whether it was ultimately justifiable to group liaison workers as providers in matching remained an open question at this stage of the study.

5.4.4. A weight of responsibilities; the role of the seeker

On the simple measures of participatory power used in defining the hierarchy of roles in matching, the seeker's role appeared to be one of the weakest. Yet it was also one of the most complex. As the participant closest to the resource users, their circumstances and needs, the seeker would have to speak for them in their absence. If the background papers provided insufficient information, the seeker would best placed to fill in the gaps. The seeker carried primary responsibility for acquiring a suitable placement for the child, either at this matching meeting or a another, and as the participant with continuing responsibility for the case whatever the outcome of the matching, the seeker would also have an important agenda of his or her own. The perspectives of the seeker, parents and child were not always or necessarily wholly consonant with each other, as the meeting minute discussed earlier testifies but if the seeker did not represent the views and feelings of the users then they would have no voice at matching at all.

Given the nature of the setting, the seeker's role was crucial and unique. The providers had their own interests to attend to, such as protecting their family from inappropriate or destructive placements, ensuring that they fully understood what would be required of them by the child and the agency, ensuring that the tasks they were being asked to undertake were manageable by them, and so on. The regulators were temporary; once they had made their recommendation on the placement they had no further direct responsibility for the case. The matching meeting was effectively the last opportunity for seekers to advance their own and the family's priorities before a placement was approved and set in train.

The performance of the seeker role in relation to others in the matching meetings was therefore likely to be quite critical to the quality of practice at these meetings. Whether or not the apparent structural weakness of their role was mitigated by other constituents of the process will be examined in later stages of the study.

5.4.5 A change in practice?

Balance in matching decision-making had become an issue for the agency itself. During the preliminary stages of this study a seminar was mounted in the agency for all staff involved in foster care. Its purpose was to discuss a proposed strategy for increasing the 'child-centredness' of placement matching. Training workshops were often held for agency staff on aspects of family placement work but this one was significant in that it was the first since the introduction of the Fostering Panels to take placement matching as its central theme.

It was not the roles of carers and family with which the seminar was concerned, however, but that of the regulators. Whereas matching panels had hitherto been convened in the Division in which the carers lived, were paid, reviewed and supported, they were in future to be arranged and staffed by the Division in which the child's case was managed. As far as possible, the individuals on the matching panel were to be the same as those who originally approved the child's referral and the same again if a placement failed and the child needed to be matched to a new resource. By

these means, according to the senior officer presenting the arguments for this strategy, decision-making would become more child centred because the matching panel would have a vested interest in ensuring the best prospects for the child in placement. It would "know the child and feel a sense of ownership for the child's case and its outcome" and would be consequently be more rigorous in its appraisal of a suitable resource. 'Child-centred' thus appeared to mean precisely the quality of decision making that the theoretical model of matching would produce but the agency had identified the composition of the panel and not the agenda as the key to this quality of decision making.

The structural change was a modest one in practical terms but represented quite a fundamental change in the thinking. Up to this point, the agency had seen matching panels immune to the vested interests of the parties to the placement as the key to child-centred, needs-led decision making. Now it was placing its faith in panels with a partisan interest in the child. Panels which were part of the Division managing the child's case would, it was believed, share the resource seeker's concern to place the child well and carry this focus through when matching placements. Continuity in the panel would reinforce this by ensuring that failed matching returned to the same place. Following the same logic, panels drawn from the Division managing the resource had presumably been focusing too much on the interests of the resource and its providers. Implicitly, for it was not openly discussed at the seminar, the agency was recognising an inherent tension, even competition, between provider and seeker interests in the conduct of matching which had been allowed inadvertently to work against its objective of meeting the child's placement needs. By shifting panel allegiance to the seeker it sought to rectify this.

It is possible that the strategy was successful in its objectives, strengthening both the seeker's capacity to advance the interests of the child and the quality of matching in more general respects. However, there were some apparent weaknesses in the strategy. Firstly, the structural change was likely to affect only a limited number of matchings. In endorsing the principle of continuity in approval, matching and

It is possible that the strategy was successful in its objectives, strengthening both the seeker's capacity to advance the interests of the child and the quality of matching in more general respects. However, there were some apparent weaknesses in the strategy. Firstly, the structural change was likely to affect only a limited number of matchings. In endorsing the principle of continuity in approval, matching and rematching panels, practitioners at the seminar also pointed out how difficult this would be to put into practice given the competing demands on their time. Rather than add further delays into the process it might have to be accepted that in some instances the panel chairperson alone would have to represent the continuity. Secondly, where case and resource were managed within the same Division, the matching panel had had and would continue to have a dual allegiance. The new arrangements would not affect these. Thirdly, the strategy did not address other aspect of matching structure and content about which this study has raised a number of issues. The same background papers would continue to be used and, as we have seen, the content of these was far from ideal for matching purposes. Other roles in the structure would remain much the same and problems have been identified in the relationships between these and the tasks and content of matching. Beyond restating its intention that the child's interests be paramount in matching, the agency had gone no further in clarifying precisely how it wanted the practice conducted and what criteria it expected practitioners to apply in recommending a placement match.

Finally, the strategy had not addressed the fundamental problem of too many referrals chasing too few resources and it is to this situation and the issues it raised for matching that I now turn.

5.5. The Relations of Supply and Demand in the AFS

Consistent with the national trends in public child care I spoke of in the opening chapter, the agency continued throughout the 1980s to exert a downward pressure on its admissions to care and its use of residential placements. Tighter management of the gateways into care was accompanied by larger, ring-fenced budget allocations to support children and families in their own homes and communities. The capacity of

the residential sector was reduced and the money saved was transferred in part to the foster care sector. The remainder of the savings was used to offset a general agency budget deficit under the threat of rate-capping, for this process was occurring simultaneously with substantial cuts in local authority budgets (Agency Committee Reports, 1981-1991). There was no suggestion, however, in any of the agency papers surveyed for this part of the study that the preference for foster care was based in any way on a belief that economies could be made thereby. It was a case simply of believing care in a family to best for a child.

Agency policy became more emphatic that children should ideally be 'placed' in their own family and community "with support where this can provide an adequate degree of care and control" (Committee Report, Feb. 1985). Substitute care was to be used only where the family of origin could not achieve this standard and placement in foster care with the objective of reunifying child and family at the earliest appropriate opportunity was the preferred form of placement in such cases. Placement should be local to the child's family, school and community and contact between child and family should be maintained so long as this was consistent with the child's welfare. Residential placement was ideally to be reserved for when the child was "at risk to him/herself or others in the community" or where the child "has medical, psychiatric or special educational needs which can best be met in a residential context". Accordingly, a joint strategy was also agreed between the Education and Social Work departments to control admissions to residential schools and allocate resources to educational and social support in local schools (*ibid.*).

Policy and practice in the agency continued to develop in this direction such that by 1989 a policy was in place that no child under twelve years of age was to be placed in residential care other than in very exceptional circumstances. Residential care remained an option for children over that age, however, "as a positive step when it would best meet the particular needs of the young person and when substitute family care is otherwise inappropriate or (occasionally) is unavailable". (Agency Four-Year Planning Statement, 1989) In this report, the terms on which residential care was to be used are more liberal than they appear to have been in 1985, but the status of the provision

remained ostensibly that of an exceptional rather than routine recourse even for older children in care.

In the same year, the agency reported to its committee on the success of its policies;

> "The Council's emphasis on preventative work with children and their families and the avoidance where possible of reception into care led to [the agency] having fewer children in care per head of population than the average for Scotland as a whole. In [the agency] a greater proportion of children have been cared for in the community compared with residential care."
>
> **(Committee Report, March 1991)**

Success was thus represented as fewer children being admitted to care and more children being cared for either in their own homes under the supervision of the agency or in foster care. The phrase 'in the community' stood for care in a family and the quote from the committee report reflects the firm demarcation that came to be made between family-based and institutional care (the agency tended to present its child care statistics in these two categories) and the correspondingly lower profile given to the distinction between being cared for at home and being cared for away from home. An intervention tariff had effectively been created with support for children in their own homes sitting almost side by side with foster care as a low tariff and residential care of any kind occupying the higher level. Notwithstanding the actual location of a residential institution, and most of the agency's own children's homes were in residential areas, institutional care was not 'in the community' in the currency of agency discourse. It was therefore something to be used only as a last resort when 'community' care failed or was otherwise clearly contra-indicated.

Beneath the general statistics of success in the terms the agency had set for itself was new set of problems, however. As elsewhere where similar policies had been implemented (*viz.* Parker, 1988 in respect of England and Wales, Triseliotis and Russell, 1984 in respect of Scotland), the effect was to create a smaller but older and more transient population of children actually in care. The probability of admission to the care of the agency in 1989 was over one and a half times greater for children aged twelve and over than for children below that age (Internal agency statistics). The twelve years and over group constituted fifty-seven per cent of children in foster care

and over ninety per cent of all children in all forms of residential care. While stays in care were on average of less than nine months duration but the incidence of recurrent admissions had increased. Due to the difficulty in recruiting emergency foster carers for older children - there was no fee incentive for them at the time - the majority of these children were received on admission into the now contracted residential sector. The rate of admission to care began to rise again and the residential sector began to feel the strain. Moreover, when planned placements in the fostering sector broke down, the residential sector was the only alternative, at least in the short term. An internal agency report of 1991 recorded a seventeen per cent rise in residential home occupancy between 1987 and 1990. Following a review of the situation the previous year, the review report noted that "residential care has been put under great pressure by a combination of decreasing capacity and an increase in the number of residents". It went on to detail some of the consequences of this as,

> "a higher number of temporary or permanent emergency transfers of young people around units; a high incidence of violent incidents in residential units; increasing use of secure accommodation; increasing unit costs which do not always appear to be reflected in improved quality of care; and low levels of morale expressed by a large number of staff."
> (Agency review paper, December, 1990)

In theory, the principal and preferred route out of a temporary residential placement for teenage children was the AFS but it had its own resource problems. Policy had progressively pushed up demand for placements in the scheme and the problems created in the residential sector added to the urgency of this demand. New carers had to be constantly recruited to meet it the expansion and also to replace those who left the scheme. Scheme officials estimated that there was about a two per cent loss of AFS carers each year and replacement was a labour-intensive, time consuming and generally costly process. The net result was a continual deficit of resources in the scheme relative to the number of referrals. An internal memo of March 1990 to the agency's senior management notes that the scheme would require an additional eighty placement resources to the one hundred and ten already on its books if it were to meet current and predicted demand over the course of the next twelve months.

There was a problem of absolute supply, and a problem of geographic distribution. Despite repeated efforts by the agency to recruit resources in city Divisions where the need was greatest, the concentration of resources remained in the landward Divisions. The 1985 annual report on the AFS noted that the landward Divisions were more than self-sufficient in resources for their own referrals whilst the city Divisions, with half as many placement resources produced almost double the number of referrals. A similar story was still being told in agency papers four and five years later when renewed effort was made to tackle the problem of resource distribution. Internal agency correspondence of 1989 and 1990 on the recruitment drive was made available to the study. This disclosed that, despite considerable financial and staff investment, only a two per cent increase had been achieved in the stock of city placement resources. It was just enough to cover the turnover in carers but not enough to increase the provision. Furthermore, the pattern of resource distribution was unaffected.

Thus, a severe bottle-neck had been created in the care system for teenage children in some measure due to the policy of replacing a fixed resource, residential care, with another, foster care, that required constant regeneration. The implicit tariff and under-resourcing that made of residential care an intervention to be avoided set a premium on AFS placements that their scarcity increased. Yet, the supply of placements was ultimately beyond the agency's control. It depended upon private individuals being personally persuaded to become and remain foster carers. Without that essential willingness to provide, no matter how much time and money the agency might be prepared to invest, the provision simply could not exist.

5.5.1. Foster placement matching and the inevitability of compromise

Provider willingness, and its close relative, motivation are essential components of the foster care supply mechanism. It is not simply a willingness to provide a service in return for remuneration that is required, but a certain quality of altruism and beneficence which can give some guarantee that the child's care needs will be met appropriately. The care agency, as purchaser and commissioner of the provision,

must tap into the personal motivation of the providers in order to acquire resources in general and a resource for each child in particular. It must also maintain this motivation through the quality of the treatment that the providers receive at its hands. To that extent, the agency must meet the provider's needs at the same time as it is attempting to meet the child's. The two sets of needs are not automatically compatible, however. The provider's willingness and motivation to provide could very well diminish in direct proportion to the child's needs if these are reflected in complex and challenging care requirements. The potential conflict of interests between the provider, on the one hand, and those acting for the user, on the other, creates a fundamental problem for the matching of individual placements. The problem is how to reconcile these different interests in such a way that the child can be satisfactorily placed and the carers' willingness to provide sustained throughout this and subsequent placements.

The problem comes down to a issue of compromise and accommodation at some level between what is needed to keep the resource on stream and what is needed for *this particular child today*. The ideal compromise would be one in which both child and carer needs were fully accommodated. However, when resources are scarce relative to demand, as they were in the AFS, the pressure to accommodate the needs of the providers is intensified. It is effectively a 'seller's market' in which the providers of the sought-after commodity are potentially in the stronger bargaining position. The commodity, the placement resource in this instance, can acquire a scarcity value that makes it too precious to risk losing through a failure to reach a compromise with the provider. In this circumstance, it could perhaps be difficult to sustain the focus on the paramouncy of the child's welfare interests.

5.6. Summary and Issues Arising for the Study

The chapter has discussed four dimensions of the context of placement matching in the AFS; its history, its accompanying documentation, the roles and relations of its participants and its situation between the competing tensions of resource supply and

demand. In the course of this, a number of interesting issues have been identified which have a direct bearing of the quality of matching practice in the scheme.

Firstly, the historical documents studied suggested that the matching had once been a rather resource-led process. That is, the providers had been very influential in the allocation of their own resources and there appeared to have been little compensating scrutiny of precisely what their resources consisted of or how well they met the child's requirements in any given case. Secondly, and coming up to date, the documents used in the matching studied seemed to have inherited some of the former resource-led traits with wide but shallow coverage of the child's details, little clarity about placement requirements and a very limited description of the resource. The agency aspired to a practice that focused primarily on the child's placement needs. The theoretical model indicates that essential to such practice is clarity about the child's placement requirements, rigorous assessment of resource properties, forward planning to enhance the placement prospects and contingency planning for the possibility that the placement might fail. One of the central questions which subsequent chapters will address is the extent to which the transcript data from the sample meetings showed evidence of these qualities in actual practice.

A third set of issues arose from the examination of the participatory structure of matching. Matching meetings were well supplied with authoritative sources on the resource since both the carers directly providing and in many ways constituting the resource and the specialist who looked after it were present in person. Whether full advantage could be or was taken of this to generate a quality of decision-making consistent with the theoretical model depended on other, countervailing factors in the structure being held in check. The central position of the providers in matching decision making contrasted with the marginal role assigned to the users. It also created the potential for an agenda of matching, which out of sensitivity to the carers' feelings, other participants would not allow to stray too far into critical examination of the resource. If this potential were not mitigated in the practice of matching then the practice would struggle to meet the standards to which the agency aspired.

The performance in matching of the liaison workers may have been critical in this regard. Tact and sensitivity in scrutinising properties of the resource should be less of issue for these officials and they were therefore in a good position to respond to questions that the carers might find difficult. The study has presumed that liaison workers were closely allied to the carers in matching but it is possible that they took a more independent line and, if so, this should be evident in the transcript data.

The absence of the child and family at matching meetings was justified in part by the agency on the grounds that it allowed thorough discussion of the child's family background. In the theoretical model, the purpose of such discussion would be three-fold; to establish the degree to which the child understood his or her own circumstances, to help the prospective carers understand these, and to establish with some precision the nature of the child's placement requirements. The participatory structure provided an opportunity for these objectives to be met and whether that opportunity was taken should also be evident in the meeting data.

The seeker's role has emerged as a crucial, complex and potentially vulnerable one in respect of a child-centred, needs-led standard of practice. The structural change in panel composition was intended to strengthen the focus on meeting the child's needs and may also have strengthened and simplified the seeker role at the same time. There is a limited opportunity in the study to explore whether it looked like being successful in either regard as two of the sample meetings took place after the change was implemented. However, the modification to the panel arrangements was not accompanied by any changes to other aspects of the process and this left it open to continuing weaknesses and imbalances in the decision-making agenda. The meeting data should indicate how persistent these problems were across the sample.

Issues of demand and supply were among those untouched by the agency's strategy. The development of policy in the agency had led the AFS to a point where it attracted a higher rate of referrals than it had resources to meet. Acquiring and maintaining

the resources required the agency to pay attention to the needs and interests of the providers as well as those of the referred children and a compromise between these two sets of needs and interests was inevitable if placements were to be made at all. The scarcity of resources created something approximating a seller's market in the scheme whereby, to put it very bluntly, the providers, carers and/ or liaison workers (on behalf of the scheme), could be in the strongest position to dictate terms of placement. If such a dynamic were to play through into the matching process then the inevitable compromise might involve sacrificing some of the child's placement requirements and the primacy of the child's needs and interests could be the first casualty. Whether it was or not in the practice studied is the key question to which all subsequent stages of data analysis were addressed.

Chapter 6.

THE TASK-RELATED SHAPE OF MATCHING IN PRACTICE

6.1. Introduction

We recall from the account of the study setting that matching meetings constituted the fourth of a seven stages between referral and placement contract in the AFS (see figure 2, Chapter 4). By the time a matching meeting took place, the referral had been approved for placement, linked to an available resource and discussed between the social worker, the potential carers and their liaison worker. Notwithstanding that some kind of evaluation of the match was presumably taking place in these preliminary stages, they were not accorded the status of matching in the agency and no written record of their findings was passed for reconsideration by the matching meeting. It was the matching meetings themselves, presided over by an independent matching panel, on which the agency placed the key responsibility for deciding on the quality of the match between the referral and the linked resource.

While the status and intention of the matching meetings was clear, precisely what should or actually did take place at them was far less so and have discussed the limitations of agency documents in this respect. The transcripts from the sample meetings were therefore the primary source of data on what the practice actually entailed. Using the procedures described as analytic Phases I and II in Chapter 3, the transcripts were analysed as speech texts, or discussions, produced by a certain type of task-related 'discursive event'. The two meetings held for the same case were generally treated as a single, interrupted event and discussion. The data set thus consisted of eight discussions produced in eight matching events by nine meetings. These were subjected to repeated waves of analysis to reveal firstly, their innate phasing structure and secondly, the form and function of each phase. The findings are discussed in sections 6.2 and 6.3 respectively with a brief summary in section 6.4. Thirdly, the substantive content of the discussions was surveyed and these findings are discussed in section 6.5.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the child-centredness of matching was an issue for the agency in terms of its aspirations and in respect of a perceived obstacle to this in the arrangements for matching panel oversight that it was attempting to correct. The child-centredness of the practice is also an issue for this study and the potential for more fundamental obstacles has been identified in its agency context. In summarising the findings on the task-related shape of the practice in section 6.6, points of comparison are made with the very child-centred theoretical model of matching. The model takes for granted that resources are scarce, one of the potential contextual obstacles for the practice, and that matching is likely to be restricted to establishing or verifying the suitability of one or two available resources. It is reasonable to presume that this was also the general purpose of matching in the study setting since it rarely dealt with more than one resource for each referral. In the course of the comparison between the practice and the model, issues arising for further analysis will be highlighted.

6.2. The Phasing of the Discussions

According to the study's informants, matching meetings were customarily allotted about an hour in which to reach their recommendation and there were confirming references to this in the texts (e.g. **"in the hour we have"; "in the next hour or so"; "we'll aim to finish this at the three o'clock mark"**). Most of the sample meetings concluded their business within this time although the two meetings involved in the first event together took nearly three hours (170 minutes) to come to a final decision. At the other extreme, meeting 8 reached a decision in only 32 minutes. The duration of each of the meetings is shown below in figure 1 along with the number of participants at each.

Figure 1. Meetings, number of participants and duration

Event no.	1a	1b	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Duration in minutes	80	90	65	50	50	32	50	50	50
No. participants	11	11	10	7	6	8	7	7	8

Meetings in the district where events 1 and 2 took place comprised a larger than average group of participants and tended to take longer to reach a decision. Otherwise there was no apparent correlation between the number of participants and duration. A common feature of all the meetings in the sample, however, was that discussion was almost continuous from the moment they began, with participants sometimes speaking in rapid succession and even, on occasions, at the same time. This produced long, dense and complex texts that required considerable time and effort to classify and compare for common phases and content.

The informal mode in which the meetings were conducted and the absence of an explicit agenda in most of them further complicated the analysis. As I noted in the previous chapter, the meetings worked without written agendas, did not refer to minutes of previous meetings on the case or have more than rudimentary minutes consistently taken of them. The chairpeople in the sample discussions tended not to be very directive and only three of them made any attempt to suggest, in outline only, the areas of business that should be covered. Chairperson 1 suggested four areas to be covered; the child and what he referred to as **"what kind of prospects should be in the placement"**; the child and resource **"as a mix"**, education issues arising from the particular circumstances of the case and finally an assessment of potential placement problems. The agenda proposed by Chairperson 7 also started with the child's particulars and placement requirements (**"why community care for M and why at this stage"**), but included a specific reference to the resource and what it had to offer the child and to consideration of the child and resource together in placement. Chairperson 6 simply asked panel members for issues that they wanted to be raised at some point. Otherwise, participants launched into the substantive business of the meeting with only the barest of introductory remarks from the chair. The order of events that followed was then left to unfold along its own path with occasional impromptu directions or suggestions from the panel. Indeed, one of the implicit rules of the process appeared to be the absence of any obligation on participants to discipline themselves to an orderly progress through the topics and issues raised at the outset or subsequently in the belief that such discipline would inhibit discussion.

Rather, they were allowed and in some cases invited to contribute as and when inspiration struck them. (e.g. **"people just free to say if they've got something to contribute"; "just chip in when something occurs to you"**). For the chairperson in discussion 1, the rule of spontaneity appeared to be accepted as the only way to achieve a 'full discussion'.

> Over the course of the meeting there are kind of four areas that we feel we need to cover. No particular order. If you've got your tuppence worth to put in please get it in at the time it's in your head because the object of the exercise is to get as full a discussion as we can in the time we've got.

On the evidence of the pattern of the sample discussions as a whole, he might have been speaking for any one of them.

As a result of the extempore approach taken to the discussions, phases were often indistinct and topics would emerge and re-emerge in various guises throughout the duration of the meetings without explicit reference to the item of business that the speaker was addressing at the time. Yet, there clearly were procedural rules and order of some kind operating in the discussions for they were not undisciplined, most participants contributed at some point, and recommendations were concluded upon which allowed prospective placements to proceed to the next stage. In observing the meetings, one had had an increasing sense of an underlying script to which participants were orientating themselves and by which the structure and content of matching talk was being conditioned. Subsequent repeated examination of and comparison between the texts confirmed this impression. The rudimentary agenda-setting of the three chairpeople I have referred to proved, in broad terms, to be fairly predictive of the general order in which matters were attended to and the discussions were found to have a substantial range of topics in common.

The method of analysis employed to identify and define phases of talk involved detailed examination of the exchanges and sequences and comparison of these between the texts on the basis of their communication formats and focal subject matter. Eight phases of discussion were identified by this means and these are set out below in figure 2 with a brief description of the defining linguistic characteristics of each. The order of phases in figure 2 is that which best reflects the generality of

meetings in the sample and each phase has been given a signifying letter and descriptive label for ease of reference in the subsequent discussion.

Figure 2. Characteristic phases and their order in the matching process

A. **Opening formalities**; personal introductions between participants followed by introductory statements by the chairperson. The introduction generally includes a statement of the possible recommendations open to the meeting to make and may include some form of loose agenda setting. May be minimal but never omitted.

B. **Focus on child**; the social worker is requested to report on the child's details and circumstances by the chairperson. Reporting by the social worker is typically interrupted by questions from panel members and other participants which results in a predominantly question-answer format for this phase. Variable in style and content but never omitted.

SS. **Sifting and synthesis**; a recurrent phase in which subject matter may range widely. It is always present to some degree and often makes its first appearance after a focus on child phase. The predominant format is typically question-answer-comment and any number of participants may be involved.

C. **Focus on current placement**; the current carer or social worker may be asked to report on the child in her current, temporary placement The format is predominantly reporting and commenting with some questioning. The phase varies widely in duration and may be omitted altogether

D. **Focus on prospective placement**; usually very short and often fragmented phase in question-answer or question-answer-comment format involving a variety of participants. Distinguished from sifting and synthesis primarily by its content, which centres on the terms of the prospective placement, and, commonly, its resolution in a decision on one or more of the terms discussed. It may be but is seldom omitted entirely.

E. **Focus to resource**; proposed carers are invited to ask questions, answer them or to comment. May include some discussion of the resource they offer and its relation to the child to be placed but does not necessarily do so. Never omitted.

T. **Trouble-shooting**; recurrent phase in similar format to sifting and synthesis phases which often makes its first appearance after the focus on resource phase. It centres on talk of potential problems with and in the prospective placement. May be limited but is never omitted

F. **Closing formalities**; usually begins with a phase of serial commenting in which each participant summarises their owns views on the proposed placement and the recommendation that should be made.. Subsequently, the chairperson indicates the recommendation reached and may also contribute a personal summary before closing the meeting.

The order in which the phases were actually sequenced varied to some extent between meetings but B, the 'focus on child' phase, invariably followed A, the 'opening formalities'. Most phases tended to occur once or twice at most while phases of 'sifting and synthesis' (SS) or 'troubleshooting' (T) would recur several times in between them. Phases C, 'focus on current placement' and D, focus on prospective placement, were omitted in a small minority of the sample without preventing a decision being arrived but all other phases were consistently found. The occurrence and order of the phases as they were identified in each of the sample texts is shown in figure 3.

Figure 3. The occurrence and sequence of phases in each meeting

Event no.	Duration in min.	Order of phases	Phases omitted
1	part a) 80 part b) 90	A B SS T SS B D SS C SS T SS T SS E T F A SS E SS T D SS F G	} None
2	65	A B SS C SS D SS E SS T D SS T F D F	None
3	50	A B SS C SS D SS E T SS T F D F	None
4	50	A B SS E T B SS D SS D SS E T E T D F	C
5	32	A B SS C SS B E T E T D F	None
6	50	A B D SS T D E T D T F	C
7	50	A B SS E T E T SS F	C D
8	50	A B SS B SS B SS C T SS D SS D SS E SS F	None

Some of the phases proved easier to recognise and define than others because they were more clear-cut in their initiation and ending and more focused in subject matter. This was particularly the case in the earlier stages of the discussions that tended to be more structured than the latter. The general direction of the phases in all discussions, however, did follow much the same pattern with the child as the first focus of attention followed by the prospective placement, the resource and potential problems before a view was taken about the appropriate disposal. In this respect the structure bore a resemblance to the theoretical model of matching which also takes the child as the first point of reference from which to consider resource properties and other details of the proposed placement. However, as we shall see, in some important respects, this resemblance was only superficial.

6.3 The Form and Function of the Phases

Having established the general character and order of phases in the sample discussions, each phase was examined more closely on its form and content with a view to inferring its apparent function in the decision making process. In discussing the findings from this examination a simplified transcription code based on conventions referred to by Silverman (1993; 117-118) is used to annotate illustrative extracts from the data and initials are used to signify the speakers. The respective codes are set out in the key tables below.

Transcription Symbols

[	Left brackets indicate the point at which a current speaker's talk is overlapped by another speaker's talk
=	Equal signs, one at the end of a line and one at the beginning, indicate no gap between the two lines of speech
(.)	A dot in parenthesis indicates a short pause between a speaker's utterances
(?)	A question mark in parenthesis indicates transcriber's inability to hear what was said
(word)	Parenthesised words are possible hearings or interpretations
((word))	Double parenthesis indicates transcriber's descriptions rather than transcriptions

Abbreviations for speakers in data extracts

PC	Panel Chairperson
PM1,2 etc	Panel members in order of speaking
SW	Child's Social Worker
CC	Child's current foster carer or residential key worker
LW	Liaison Worker
SCf	Female AFS carer providing the proposed placement
SCm	Male AFS carer providing the proposed placement

Phase A. The Opening Formalities

The matching meetings began on a convivial note with personal introductions by name and role and other casual conversation between the participants. The typical formula then followed would consist of a statement by the chairperson of the three possible recommendations open to the meeting to make, and a request for a report from the placing social worker. The Chairperson in discussion 2 confirmed the formulaic nature of these opening formalities by side-stepping them; **"We'll dispense with all the usual preamble"**, he said, **"because everyone here knows it"**. Figure 4 below illustrates the formula with a typical extract from discussion 8 which begins after the introductions have been completed and concludes when the Chairperson (PC) addresses a request to the child's social worker (SW) to 'update' the background papers on the child. His introduction to the three possible outcomes of the meeting occurs in lines 1-5 and the request for the social worker's report is in line 11.

Figure 4. A typical simple version of the opening formalities (from discussion 8)

1	PC	OK. For this meeting there are three options. The first option is to agree to the
2		matching and proceed to introductions this morning. The second option is to
3		postpone the decision to allow for further work or information to be gathered, more
4		work to be done. And the third option is to decide on the basis of this meeting not to
5		proceed with the match. We're quite pushed for time in a sense in order to get the
6		introductions done but we'll hopefully finish this around the quarter to mark and allow
7		D- ((LW)) in there with the carers and S- ((SW)). Right, we've got some papers -
8		((AFS)) carers, obviously we've got your profiles and we've got papers from (.) is it M-
9		K- ((child's previous social worker))?
10	SW	That's right, yes.
12	PC	So can I ask you maybe to update the papers and I'm particularly interested in when
13		the transfer happened and any possible, what M-K-'s role may now be in it or is it a
14		complete transfer?

In only three discussions did the Chairperson attempt to set an agenda beyond this. In discussion 6 this was done by asking panel members what issues they wished to have discussed in the course of the meeting. In discussions 1 and 7 the Chairpeople suggested agenda items themselves, in not dissimilar terms as shown in figure 5.

Figure 5. Agenda setting

Example a) from discussion 1

PC	((*Personal introductions followed by statement of the possible recommendations*))... Over the course of the meeting there are kind of four areas that we feel we need to cover. No particular order. If you've got your tuppence worth to put in please get it in at the time it's in your head (.) So then, four areas broadly are bit about Lesley, let's get some picture of what Lesley is like, how she functions, then what kind of prospects should be in a placement; secondly how we see the ((proposed carer)) household and Lesley as a mix; thirdly, issues around education with Lesley; and finally, the kind of catch-all one which is trying to anticipate what the placement might feel like. So it's identifying the kind of problem areas, opening one's eyes particularly ((the carer's)) eyes as far as we can to what the placement might look like....

Example b) from discussion 7

PC	... the actual way I'd like to structure the discussion would be that we'd want to kick off by bringing J- ((child's social worker)) in fairly early on just to sketch in some of the background in terms of why community care for M- and why at this stage etc. and obviously throughout all this discussion Mrs B ((proposed carer)), S- ((liaison worker)) and others can chip in and ask, if you like, questions that we'd want to ask, obviously also in terms of Panel members also. Em, and then, after we've looked in some detail on M- we than can put the focus on Mr and Mrs B and invite S in just to kind of give us a bit of an idea as to why you for this particular girl, as it were, what are the things that you would have to offer in terms of positives etc., and, eh, having looked at all that and looking at some of the finer details in terms of you as a family and she as an individual, we'll try to pull these things together, reach a common way forward and make a recommendation to the Divisional director in due course. OK? That sound all right?

The opening formalities, as I noted earlier, provided a first reference point for the analysis of phases in the matching. They also contained clues to two further implicit rules of the practice in addition to the rule of spontaneity.

One of these rules appeared to be that of decision-making by consensus inclusive of the whole group of participants. Throughout the extracts in figures 4 and 5, and this was common to the sample as a whole, we see the use of the collective personal pronoun 'we' to signify who will cover certain areas of discussion and come to a decision as a result. This is a common mechanism in institutional talk which has the effect of invoking the institutional over the personal identity, inducing or acknowledging mutuality in the activity and sharing accountability for tasks and their outcomes (Drew and Heritage, 1992; 30-31). By generalising to the whole group the responsibility for the content and process of decision making, distinctions between the panel and the other participants, between agency officials and the 'private' carers, between resource seeker and provider were obscured and a sense of cohesion invoked. Officially, responsibility for the decision reached lay with the panel whose involvement ostensibly provided independent accountability for placement selection. This did not appear to be the way decisions were actually made, however, and I shall be returning to this point when describing the closing formalities.

The third of the three implicit rules heralded in the 'opening formalities' phase appeared to be that of 'the preferred outcome' which Smith and May (1980) identified in relation to children's hearings. There were three possible outcomes of a matching meeting; to endorse the placement, not to endorse it or to seek further information before making the final decision. The phrasing in lines 1 to 7 of Figure 4 is typical of the sample in that the option of approving the placement, or 'match' as it was often spoken of, is mentioned first and then coupled to immediate preparations for placement introductions. In this example, the chairperson is clearly anticipating the outcome of the meeting as to approve the placement and timing the discussion accordingly; **"The first option is to agree to the matching and proceed to introductions this morning.... We're quite pushed for time in a sense in order to get the introductions done but we'll hopefully finish this around the quarter to mark and allow D- ((LW)) in there with the**

carers and S- ((SW))". Other chairpeople were not quite so obvious but it was noted during observation of the meetings that seekers and providers came prepared in most cases to meet together immediately afterwards. The chairperson in extract b) of Figure 5 acknowledges in line 12 the formality of referring the recommendation for approval **("...reach a common way forward and make a recommendation to the Divisional Director in due course")** but he too had begun the meeting with a reference to the possibility of introductions being planned as soon as it had concluded. The discussion this appeared to proceed on the basis that approval was the more likely outcome and, as Smith and May (1980) have observed, the evidence against such an outcome would have to be considerably stronger than the evidence for it. This implication of the rule seemed to be being highlighted by the chairperson of discussion 1 who weighted the option of not approving the placement match with the words **"and give good reasons for that".**

Phase B. Focus on the child

The opening formalities invariably concluded with a request for and account of the child's case by her social worker in what was sometimes referred to as a 'case update' or 'updating the papers'. Sometimes the chairperson would elaborate on this by asking for specific information and sometimes not. Sometimes the social worker would respond with early case information and other times with the most recent events. This variation in shown in figure 6 below, which sets out the requests and responses with which the 'focus on the child' phase began.

Figure 6. Requests and responses initiating the 'focus on the child' phase

Event No.	Request	Response
1	We have a kind of tradition here that we invite the placing social worker to kick us off really just to bring us up to date. I know the forms were completed the end of August so we're a couple of months on from that point.	Funnily enough, I was looking through the forms this morning before I came out and not a great deal has changed in genera, etc.
2	We'll go straight to you, M- ((social worker)). Can you bring us up to date.	Yes, I suppose I'll start really with Wendy's home circumstances in the last few months...
3	Right, can I ask M- ((social worker)), not so much the residential side because E- ((current carer)) can fill in that but certainly on the personal side of Molly and perhaps a little, a brief feedback on her earlier times but bring us up to date.	First became involved with Molly and her family in the spring. The family brought her into the office, em, on duty originally saying they just wanted her taken into care and I tried to delay that, etc.
4	*Data lost due to technical fault in recording*	*Data lost due to technical fault in recording*
5	We need an update on Linda ... I think we need some clarification on the reasons for Linda coming into care and Linda's agreement. Is it just for non-attendance at school?	She was referred 'beyond parental control' because she'd had one nights out and her Mum didn't know where she was, etc.
6	((Opening formalities included request for issues panel wished to discuss)) What we'll do is we'll open it out, maybe, and start with you, O- ((social worker)) to say, you know, addressing some of those issues along with telling us a wee bit about Linda and what she'll feel in placement. What she needs to get from it. I mean there things like more of a picture of Linda, obviously the school situation and the family context. So, maybe addressing those and others that you feel might be pertinent.	I'll give a quick update on what's already written is [sic] probably a good place to start, etc.
7	Maybe if we just sketch over some of that ((referring to information already heard at referral meeting)) and just pick out the main issues J- ((social worker)) and then we can move forward from there.	Well, initially I met Melissa when she came into the ((hospital where social worker based)) having taken an overdose, etc.
8	((Newly transferred case)) Well, based on what you've gleaned in the last few weeks, S- ((social worker)), and the papers before you, a quick sort of run down on the family things and the bits and pieces you've picked up.	How far back do you want me to go? I mean, when she came up from England and I think it's coming up for four years since she came back, etc.

As we see in the first column of figure 6, only one of the chairpeople in the sample (event 6) explicitly requested that the social worker define the child's placement requirements **("what she needs to get from it").** In the other discussions the request was made simply for 'a sketch', 'some feedback', a 'run-down' on general events and issues in the child's life and care. It appeared that the social workers were not

expected to provide a comprehensive case history or assessment report on the case and, for at least one social worker (event 8) it was not at all clear what information was expected of her to begin with. However, once begun, the social worker's accounts were soon interrupted by questions from panel members and occasionally also other participants. These questions had the effect of directing the course of the account thereafter and this is illustrated in figure 7 with an extract from the focus on the child phase in discussion 5, which is typical of the sample.

Figure 7. Example of the question-answer format of the 'focus on the child' phase from discussion 5

1	PM1	What was the mothering like for her, do you know, at the age of six and eight and nine?
2	SW	We only got Linda as a case two years ago so I mean there's a file like this ((indicates
3		voluminous)) but I would think it would be (.) Mum would always be there but she's
4		quite open about the fact that she'd always found it difficult touching any of her children
5		once they're beyond the baby stage, let alone cuddling, or being more affectionate
6		towards them. she finds that very difficult. She's a person who was in and out of care
7		herself when she was a youngster, and so I would think it would be fairly deprived, you
8		know, emotionally. And she always prefers to work, cleaning jobs and what have you.
9		She says she goes back and sits in the house.
10	PM1	Do you expect Linda to regress at all when she is in a family that has a normal family
11		life?
14	SW	No, not so much. I think she's acting very age-appropriate. I mean, she'll sit beside
15		members of the staff but she won't want to sit on the knee or anything, will she? ((to
16		child's residential current carer)) she's not that sort of youngster that really wants to go
17		back quite a bit.
18	PM2	Yes, so you don't think that the eight and a half and six year old ((in the proposed
19		carer's household)) will be vulnerable to vying for, you know. If Linda is not liable to
20		regress to that stage then there won't be competition.
21	SW	No, I think it's quite interesting that she sees herself as wanting to be a social worker
22		now, you know, she's seeing herself as almost wanting to help people, not be a client as
23		it were and, I think you can see that in some of her behaviour, I mean, she"
24		spontaneously get up and make cups of tea when I arrive. She's wanting to help out.
25	PC	That's not the sort of thing social workers do!
26		((group laughter))
27	PM2	It's the adults that she's (.) ?
28	SW	((Sister)) will sit and look sorry for herself when I arrive and you have to say 'what's the
29		matter ((sister)) and she's nearly twenty, and Linda will want to be organising things (.)
30		and she does that in C- ((children's home)) doesn't she? ((to current carer)). The first
31		thing she'll do is 'are you wanting tea or coffee?' She likes to be busying around quite a
32		lot.
33	PC	Is there any suspicion that she was abused herself?
34	SW	She's always been adamant that she wasn't. She used to get very annoyed with me for
35		continually asking when she was showing me a lot of frustration about being at home
36		and I asked her several times if anything has happened and she would get very angry.
37	PC	She sounds quite controlled does Linda)

In line 1 of figure 7 a panel member directs the subject matter to the child's earlier experience of her mother's care and this leads the social worker on to the subject of the child's mother herself. The same panel member in line 10 uses another question to change the topic to the child's potential behaviour in the prospective placement. The

panel chairperson takes over direction of the account by, rather suddenly in line 33, changing the topic to the possibility of the child having been abused (this appears to be a reference to the background papers which mention the father's abuse of a sister). The social worker is manifestly responding to the panel's agenda rather than giving an account of her own.

The extract in figure 7 also shows other typical features of the 'focus on the child' phase in the sample. The dominant question-answer-follow-up question format of the phase was laced with analytical and interpretative comment by the questioners, demonstrating that inferences were being drawn from the information sought and imparted. See, for example, the panel member's deduction in line 18-20 that the carer's child is unlikely to feel competition from the referred child and the chairperson's interpretation of the child in line 37 that **"She sounds quite controlled does Linda".** The function of the 'focus to child' phase appeared to be primarily to set this process of asking, telling and interpreting in train and for such a purpose, an account of the child in any form would presumably suffice. The speed with which the accounts were interrupted suggests that the social worker was not expected to provide a cohesive description of the child's needs and the kind of resource that might best meet them.

The 'focus on the child' phase was distinctive in its directed focus on the child and her circumstances but this was not its only subject. It was by no means comprehensive in its coverage of child-related details and it was not the only point at which the child might be discussed in detail. Aspects of the case were raised and responded to throughout the discussions and by their close, participants would usually have covered a wide range of matters concerning the child's personality, behaviour and her relationships; the events surrounding and following her referral for placement; her response to being in care and to particular events that had occurred there. From the structural analysis it was not clear how well the child's individual needs and placement requirements emerged out of this detail but they were certainly not conveyed precisely in the focus to child phase.

SS. Sifting and Synthesis

Between the more subject centred phases were recurrent sequences that drew in various participants and covered various topics. It was in these phases that the activity of interpreting information seemed to be at its most intense and explicit. During 'sifting and synthesis' phases, participants would question, answer, comment and infer in quick succession and appeared by this means to be gradually building a consensual image of the child and of her future placement upon which a judgement could ultimately be made. This intermittent process of sifting and synthesising commonly began immediately after the 'focus on the child' phase had been established by the social worker's reporting. In the extract in figure 8, for example, a panel member draws an implication from the social worker's account of the child's family background. The social worker develops the theme and a conclusion is drawn by another panel member (PM2) about the origin of one of the child's perceived problems.

Figure 8. Example of 'sifting and synthesis', from discussion 7 following on from case update

1	PM1	Do you see, you have a split family, each side is frightened to a certain extent, to step
2		up the discipline or restrictions because the child will say 'well, the other side gave me a
3		better time', or 'I'm just pushing off to the other parent', whatever, so there's always this
4		certain amount of reservation regarding the structure of restrictions and all the rest of it.
5	SW	Well, I think what happened there was that mother was actually more strict than she
6		would want to be because she felt the father used no discipline at all. Father than used
7		no discipline at all because he felt mother was too strict. Mother and father do not
8		speak, cannot speak, don't communicate with each other at all and quite often
9		communicate through the children by telling the children what they think of the other half.
10	PM2	We can see where M- has learnt to be as manipulative as she is.
11	PM1	She's been taught to!

In a second example, figure 9, the discussion has progressed through a phase of 'focus to resource' and then a phase of 'sifting and synthesis' occurs in which panel members, the proposed carers and the social worker are demonstrably making connections between the referred child and the proposed placement.

Figure 9. Example of 'sifting and synthesis' after focus to resource phase in discussion 6

1	PM1	Have they both left school now?
2	SCF	Who, my two? No, one's only 12.
3	PM1	Oh 12 and 15.
4	PC	D-((former foster child)) was 18.
5	SCF	Whether the one that's 16 is going to be leaving or not don't know that yet, S- is just
6		going to start Secondary so I don't really see them having the same circle of friends, my
7		two are into football and that's it, end of story. Just going for a game of football in the
8		park which I don't know if Linda would be (.)?
9	PM2	Well Laura likes football.
10	PC	Yes she is kind of tomboy.
11	PM2	She is tomboyish, she is at the age where she may actually make a connection with
12		your oldest boy.
13	SCF	I think if it was going to be with any of them it would be with S-, the younger one.
14	PM2	I would suspect it might be your older boy actually, rather than the younger one.
15	SW	Laura's kind of tomboyish in her [ ] but she's more and more feminine looking as the
16		months have gone on actually but yes she's very much interested in boys. Yes, I mean
17		if we go out for a drive or out for lunch it's a talent spotting morning for Laura and she
18		jokes about that but perhaps that's finding out what she feels and what she thinks etc.
19		as well but I think she would be interested in finding out obviously about boys and I don't
20		know it depends on their personality and hers whether they would socialise but maybe.
21	PM2	But what was different from the previous placement is that it involved the same school.
22	PC	Yes.
23	SW	She would probably want to be more involved I would think and get to know the boys
24		more than what D- did by the sounds of it I would say with Linda and she does she
25		wants to know.

In line 1, a panel member puts a question to the proposed carer (SCF) about her children. In line 4, the chairperson refers to a previously placed child (Diane) which introduces the issues of how the new foster child and the carers' sons might mix. It is the chairperson (PC), not the social worker, who defines the referred child as a 'tomboy' (line 10) and a panel member (PM2) who deduces that she might be interested in the carer's older son (lines 11 and 14). The social worker merely confirms this assessment (lines 15 to 20). The images of the child and the child in the future placement are the property of the group and they are continuing to be developed through the interactive sharing and interpretation of certain information.

A striking feature of the 'sifting and synthesis' phases was the near absence of any indication of dissent or disagreement. That Melissa was manipulative (see line 10 of figure 8), for example, and Linda a tomboy (line 10 of figure 9) went uncontested. There was no evidence of attempts to read the girls' characteristics in different, more sympathetic ways and no challenge to the gendered nature of these descriptions. Nor, where implied links were made between the child's characteristics and particulars of the prospective resource, were these discussed in any depth. In that the function of

'sifting and synthesis' sequences appeared to be to work on information given towards a judgement about the placement, one might have expected them to be the sites of keenest debate in the discussions. This was not the case and the rule of consensus appeared to go unobstructed by opposing interpretations or challenging questions in these and all the other phases of discussion.

Phase C. Focus on current placement

This phase emerged distinctively in the data only when the child's current foster or residential carer was among the participants and in these circumstances it could be quite substantial. Otherwise, information about the child's current placement may emerge in the course of the social worker's reporting on the child generally but this tended to be intermittently delivered and variable in content. This finding suggests that the principal purpose of the phase was less to establish a detailed appraisal of the current placement than to provide for a perspective on the child from the current carers. Where this perspective could not be given because the carer was unavailable, the phase was omitted leaving the social worker to contribute whatever details he or she thought to or was prompted to provide elsewhere in the course of discussion. Figure 10 below shows whether and how the phase was identified in the sample discussions.

Figure 10. Initiating questions of current placement phase

Event No.	How phase initiated	Response	Matters covered
1	B1: "How else has she been like with you?"	CC: " Generally, I mean, when she first came to us she was happy to be with us and settled fairly well. Etc.	• Child's behaviour in unit and how managed by staff • Child's personality • Child's relationships with younger brother in care elsewhere. • Aspects of child's other family relationships in context of contact from care
2	B1: So, what's she been like to live with in the couple of months()	CC: Well, as M- ((SW)) told you, the first one was really very difficult. Etc.	• Child's behaviour in placement and how managed • How child spent her time out of school • Child's level of literacy and help carer had been giving her

3	B1: Right, before we move on to identifying the actual tasks, can I ask perhaps E-((res. Keyworker)) to bring us up to date on your part of it? "	CC: When she is good she's very, very good and when she's bad she's horrid	• Child's behaviour in placement and how managed • Child's personality • Aspects of child's family relationships in context of contact from care.
4	*No CC present* *No clear phase*	*Limited reporting on placement from SW and LW*	• how and why current placement disrupted and how child is faring in the circumstances
5	B1: "How has she changed since she's been with you then?"	CC: Well, she's talking more. Etc.	• Child's behaviour in placement and how managed • Child's personality • Child's family relations in context of contact from care
6	*No CC present.* *No clear phase*	*Some reporting on current placement and how child is functioning in it in course of SW account of case*	• Child's behaviour in placement and how managed
7	No CC present. *No clear phase*	*Some reporting on current placement and how child is functioning in it in course of SW account of case*	• Child's behaviour in placement and how this managed by staff. • A little about the regime of the unit and how child is affected by it
8	*Carer enters discussion of own accord with comment about child. Chairperson responds by asking for more, and this leads into question-answer sequence between panel and current carer*	CC: Carole doesn't say much to do with her private life at all . Her best word is 'I dinna ken'. PC: But are you saying, in your fairly wide experience of youngsters that she's much more closed than anybody else, or (.)?	• Child's behaviour in placement and how managed, • Child's personality and social life • a view of what child needs • impressions of what child thinks and feels.

The reports from the current carers were predominantly anecdotal in style and concentrated in the main on the minutiae of the child's daily life in her current placement, her personality as they experienced it and the behavioural problem they had dealt with in the course of the placement. There seemed to be less of a tendency to interrupt current carers' reports than was the case with the social worker reports and some carers managed reports of over one thousand words before a question interceded. Figure 11 shows two extracts from the 'focus on current placement' phase. In the first, a) from discussion 5, a residential carer is illustrating her assertion that the child is immature for her age with an account of an incident in the unit. In the second extract, a temporary foster carer is giving an account of incidents in the household which illustrate her statement that the first month of the placement was difficult. It was a lengthy account that has been edited for economy's sake (… indicates omitted sections).

Figure 11. Accounts and inferences in the 'focus on current placement' phase

Example a) Residential carer, from discussion 3

CC	When I came back on duty I said "Look it's gone too far". Went into the girls' room, closed the door and the girls set about screeching at her ...((further details of the incident given))... which ended up with Molly being in tears, poor wee mite, so I had to cuddle her. She's fairly liked by the residents but she will try and get favours from them by snitching and that really gets up their noses, they can't hack that one either. She'll stir up trouble if she can and then sits back and watches. But it's not malicious, it's usually for a bit of fun.

Example b) Foster carer, from discussion 2

PC	So what's she like to live with in the couple of months?
CC	Well, as M- ((social worker)) has told you, the first one was very difficult ..... The only wee problem I have now with her, we got over that food and the cheek, we've got a nicer wee girl, the only problem now is that wee power struggle, you know, if I say to her we're not having tea till later, because its something that doesn't suit her, you get "Oh no, I've got to meet somebody. I want out early",.. .... Well there was an incident with Friday and yesterday, she was going to her sister's on Friday cos I had two dances and she was to stay the weekend with her sister ..... she waylaid my son as he was coming out the door "Could I come up to your house and could you run me down", and she was away before we realised what had happened and ((my husband)) was very angry ..... Then she phoned me on Saturday to say she was coming back from ((her sisters)) because it was snowing and whatever, so I says " tomorrow, could you come home about tea-time", I says because I'd maybe the chance of getting a lift to the market. "Oh no, that's too late, that's too late, I want to come home earlier.

As can be seen, both accounts rely on anecdote anchored in the care setting and focus on the carer's experience of managing the child's behaviour, which was typical. Indeed, the nature of the opening questions put to the carers (second column of figure 10) suggests that this could have been precisely what was expected of them.

Phase D. Focus on prospective placement

Once the case update and current placement reports had been given, phases of discussion tended to become less distinct, because less integrated in themselves and less neatly sequential. The 'focus on prospective placement' phase was very much a case in point for it might appear at any point and more than once in a discussion (see figure 2). It tended to grow seamlessly out of a previous sequence of discussion rather than follow a more emphatic change of focus and it tended to focus on a single issue rather than be a systematic attempt to attend to terms of the placement more comprehensively. This is illustrated in Figure 12 below which sets out how 'focus to prospective placement' phases were initiated in each of the discussions and the issues that they dealt with.

Figure 12. Initiations and issues in 'focus on prospective placement' phase

Event no.	Occurrence	How initiated and by whom (PC = panel chairperson, PM = panel member)	Issues involved
1	3	1. **PC**: What's Lesley's attitude to going to another family when she's had had a lot of movements since she's been in care? 2. **PC**: For me the education issue still sits somewhere on the table. Are there any changes on that? 3. **PM**: We did talk as well about the possibility of being able to build respite into this placement. That was partly affected by some of the unknowns around the family contact as well?	• Placement location and pattern of home visits • Case transfer • Possibility of respite for carers • Method of introduction
2	3	1. **PC**: Well, before we move on to looking at ((the resource)), what kind of tasks do you see as fairly clear ones for the placement both in the longer term and in the immediate short term? 2. **PC**: Do you have an Idea, M- ((social worker)), about how you'd like to see her managed? 3. **PC**: That was the next question. We're seeing that transfer to 'long term' as something still a bit in the future?	• Limit-setting on child • Education/ employment • Case transfer to new social worker.
3	2	1. **PC**: What are the tasks for her ((carers)) in this particular matching, considering the placement? What would you be looking for for Molly? 2. **PC**: Would it be normal weekend contact that you would be looking for as its been building up?	• Provision of stability and consistency • Placement duration • Return home and home visits
4	3	1. **PM**: Just staying with this risk of breakdown, and maybe how we can reduce the risk a bit. Now I think you mentioned earlier that she wasn't receptive to input from ((out-patient psychiatry)) 2. **PM**: But the plan is that she'll return home at some point, is that what (.)? 3. **PC**: What about the timescales from the G's ((current carers)) point of view? Are they insisting on a month's notice?	• Reducing risk of placement breakdown • Return home • Introductions and transfer from previous, failed placement
5	1	1. **PC**: Have we given any thought to the potential length of placement for Linda? Is she liable to want to go back to Mum or if she stays on at school will she be looking for longer support?	• Placement duration and return home.
6	3	**1.** **PC**: What is your local ((school))? **2.** **PM**: But I mean, that would have to be one of the limits that was an issue that was quite clear right from the beginning. Her contact with home would have to be on a regular basis that everybody knew of. **3.** **PC**: But anyway, we didn't really discuss the length of contract. We touched it and you were saying really at the moment you couldn't say. Is that because you still harbour some stuff that maybe she might go back to parents sooner rather than later on?	• School change • Home visits • Placement duration
7	0	*No planning phase recognised*	
8	2	1. **PC**: So back to my thoughts on what we're asking the carers to look at undertaking. We heard a little bit about allowing Carole to open up but that feels like a mountain to climb in some way and may or may not come with relationships and tender loving care. There's a family dimension, how would you see that fitting into this? 2. **PC**: Length of time. A-'s point about Carole needing to know that she's somewhere and that she's being owned by people I think is quite important. And the rehab. Bit almost put on the side as being 'if it happens, it happens' but look, you have tasks and business to do so I think that year minimum and moving forward on that basis.	• Home visits • Placement duration

The issues dealt with in the phase varied, as can be seen from those listed in the far right column of figure 12, but commonly concerned placement terms in relation to duration, home visits and whether or not the child was expected to return home in the foreseeable future. In the course of data analysis, this phase was initially given the provisional title of 'placement planning' but on closer inspection the evidence that issues raised in the phase were also being brought to a conclusion within it was scant.

The 'focus on prospective placement' sequences in discussion 5 provide typical examples the phase bedded down in the overall structure of the discussions. Following a discussion of the child's family, the Chairperson raised a question about the degree of family contact the social worker felt she should have from the placement. The decision on this was not reached until the summation of views near the end of the meeting. Meanwhile, the focus of attention moved to the issue of the child's educational prowess from which emerged this question from a panel member, **"and do you think she should be staying in the same school?"**. In this instance, the issue of schooling was settled when the social worker replied in the affirmative and there followed detailed discussion of the possible travelling arrangements. The Chairperson then addressed the proposed carers to seek their views (an intervention which was taken to mark in this discussion the beginning of the 'focus to the resource phase' and the discussion remained with this focus for some time. Then the Chairperson asked **"Have we given any thought to the potential length of placement for L-? Is she liable to want to go back to Mum or, if she stays on at school, will she be looking for longer support**?" and following an equivocal response from the social worker the focus of attention returned to the proposed carers and their resource. It was only in the closing formalities that the plan for an indefinite placement term was clarified.

Typically, 'focus on prospective placement' sequences drew the discussants into speculative and partial glimpses of a future placement and made some links between specific needs and specific arrangements. They did not extend to settling the terms and content of the placement and this suggests that the function of the phase was

confined to envisaging what form a placement *might* take rather than settling on the form that it should take.

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Phase E. Focus to the resource

Phases identified as 'focus to the resource' were those that took the proposed resource as their clear focal subject and were the only sequences in the sample texts to recognisably do so. The phases were versatile in terms of recurrence and placing in the order of discussion but there was always at least one occurrence and this was most commonly between or prior to a phase of troubleshooting (see events 1,3,4,5,6,7 in figure 2). Characteristically, these phases began with an open question to the proposed carers inviting their comment and the questions initiating each focus to resource phase in each of the sample discussions are set out in figure 13 below.

Figure 13. Occurrence and initiation of 'focus to the resource' phase s

Event No.	Occurrence	Question initiating phase
1	**2**	1. **LW:** C-'s ((proposed carer)) had a chat to L- ((current carer)) about it ((*referring to an incident in the child's previous placement*)) and I just wondered what you'd taken out of it, C-, you know? 2. **PC:** Right, now, there was the issues around K and your own daughter which is really at the point we ended the meeting a couple of weeks ago. Those kind of issues were being discussed and really the need for you then to know a little bit more. You've gone off and found out, you've been to [Ch. Home]? What's your feelings following that?
2	**1**	**PC:** Are there any other issues around the table that we haven't actually got out some way or another that we need to say something on?
3	**1**	**PC:** That's a big one for clarification. C- (SC) what are you thinking at this moment?
4	3	1. **PC:** We've mentioned the main issues about Christine, we've mentioned briefly what W-'s ((carer's daughter)) reaction might be, that's your main concern in front of you. 2. **PM:** Are there things you'd like to ask which would help build up better picture of [Girl] to reassure you or to check out some possibilities? 3. **c) PM:** I mean, just to push you on, how confident or otherwise are you feeling about her from what you've heard and what's happened?
5	2	**1. PM: Do you feel you have a lot of information about Linda? Do you feel you know her?** 2. **PM:** Can we move on a bit, just ask about how your family are feeling about having someone like Linda live with them.

6	1	**PC:** Can we come to you Mrs S- to maybe say a bit. I mean obviously I think we were saying that the last time we heard D- was still with you but maybe just a bit of update on what's happened in your family and D-'s gone and how that went and a bit about what you're feeling about the placement and a bit about the kind of family you are. I know that can be quite hard sometimes.
7	2	1. **PM2:** So what do you think of what you've heard of Melissa? 2. **PC:** In the light of what you've heard in that respect, do you have any particular views or things you would like to say about that? Maybe draw S- ((liaison worker)) in as well in terms of your family situation.
8	1	**PC:** What are your thoughts on discussion to date?

The questions put to the carers were self-evidently not designed to elicit an objective appraisal of the resource and its properties and they did not. Rather, they called for a largely subjective perspective on the child and the proposed placement from the resource providers and this is what they achieved. It is for this reason that the phases were classified as focusing 'to' rather than 'on' the resource. Descriptive information about the resource, such as the carers' methods of discipline or general family routines, their relationships with their own children, their interests and skills or facilities in the neighbourhood of the resource, might emerge in the course of these phases or any other in the discussion. There was little evidence of it being specifically sought, however, and no evidence of it being sought systematically in this phase.

The character of 'focus to the resource' phases was a pronounced and very consistent feature of the sample which is particularly well illustrated in an extract from the second such phase in discussion 7 (see figure 14 below). This discussion above all others might have been expected to show evidence that the properties of the resource were being carefully examined for two reasons. Firstly, it was the only one in the sample in which the panel was entirely unfamiliar with the resource and very familiar with the child's case. Indeed, one panel member had suggested at the outset that extensive discussion of the child was unnecessary precisely because of this familiarity. Secondly, in introducing the discussion, the chairperson had uniquely made explicit reference to examining the qualities of the resource after details of the child had been dealt with; **"after we've looked in some detail on Melissa, we than can put the focus on Mr and Mrs B ((the proposed carers)) and invite S ((liaison worker)) in just to kind of give us a bit of an idea as to why you for this particular girl, as it were, what are the things**

that you would have to offer in terms of positives etc.". The clear implication was that a resource-focused phase would evaluate the properties of the resource in relations to the particular requirements for the child just as practice based on the theoretical model might do. What actually happened, however, was very different.

There were two 'focus to the resource' phases in discussion 7. The first was precipitated by a panel member asking the proposed carers what they thought of the child as she had been presented to them. They responded to the effect that they did not expect the placement to be easy but that they were confident about it and the discussion had then returned to the character and circumstances of the child. The second phase began (line 1 of figure 14) with the chairperson inviting the carers to comment on information about the child's sexuality which had just been imparted by the social worker and suggesting a contribution from the liaison worker on the carer 'family situation'. In the event, the latter suggestion was not taken up either at this stage of the proceedings or any other.

Figure 14. Second phase of 'focus to resource', discussion 7

1	PC	In the light of what you've heard in that respect, do you have any particular views
2		or things you would like to say about that? Maybe draw S- ((liaison worker)) in as
3		well in terms of your family situation.
4	SC(m)	As far as Melissa's concerned, the feeling I get at the moment is she has no idea
5		of the feeling for the family ((?)) or to live with restrictions. She's not been reared
6		with any idea of consequences. She's not actually prepared in any way. Not had
7		the chance to date to sort of bring her round to carers. We've been mostly
8		concerned about how she's been staying with this Auntie. She's not wholeheartedly
9		taken on the whole concept.
10	PM	Have you had a girl or boy who was very wilful, you know, who kind of didn't have
11		any structure or restrictions put on him or her prior to coming to you?
12	SC(m)	UMM. We have.
13	SC(f)	D- and M-
14	PM	So it's not going to throw you?
15	SC(f)	Oh no!
16	PM	You feel happy?.
17	SC(f)	The only thing we'd be more aware of and noticing recently is our other son Kevin
18		who's turning 13 [ ] problems with Melanie and that sort of sexually and that would
19		one of the areas to look in.
20		*((Discussion moves into a phase of trouble-shooting))*

The contributions of the resource providers in this extract focus initially on the referred child. They are asked a specific question (line 10) about their experience of 'wilful' foster children which elicits a confident response (lines 12 to 15) but nothing

more and it is not pursued. There is no discussion of the nature of their experience in this regard, the skills they brought to it or learnt from it. The phase ends with the carer raising an issue that appears to be about the potential impact of the referred child's sexuality on her younger son and with this the discussion moves into a phase of troubleshooting. There was no suggestion from the chairperson or any other panel member that the focus to resource phases had not fulfilled their purpose and no apparent concern that the question of what the resource had specifically to offer the child had not been directly answered. The proposed carers had voiced opinions and raised questions and, to judge from the consistency of this type of contribution to the phase in the sample as a whole, it may be inferred that this is what the phase was principally for.

TS. Trouble-shooting

The format of these recurring sequences was similar to that of 'sifting and synthesis', with questions, answers and comments being shared between several speakers. It was the substantive focus and apparent function that distinguished the 'troubleshooting' sequences. They tended to occur more often in the latter half of the discussions, where they followed a phase of 'focus to the resource' or 'focus on prospective placement', and dealt with potential problems foreseen in the prospective placement.

Given their problem orientation and position in the order of phases, it was anticipated that 'troubleshooting' sequences might show the practitioners to be attempting to resolve weaknesses or misfits in the match between referral and resource that had come to light in earlier discussion. In actuality, their focus seemed to be narrowly concentrated on the confidence of the proposed carers about taking the placement on. Discussion 4 was typical in this respect. The first of three 'troubleshooting' phases began with the chairperson asking the carer, **"Are there things you'd like to ask which would help build up a better picture of Christine to reassure you or to check out some possibilities?"**, and he initiated the third phase with the question **"How confident or otherwise are you feeling about her from what you've heard?"**. Phases of 'troubleshooting'

thus provided opportunities for the proposed carers to have their doubts and uncertainties about the placement responded to and their confidence reinforced.

Providing this opportunity was clearly considered an important element of the process for, where carers had indicated nothing but confidence hitherto, a troubleshooting' phase might be introduced to test this and ensure that the carers were not underestimating the challenge potentially facing them. Discussion 1, for example, involved very experienced carers whose very active participation in the discussion had implied complete confidence on their part about what they acknowledged to be a potentially difficult placement. A troubleshooting sequence was then initiated by the liaison worker in the terms shown in line 1-5 of figure 15 below.

Figure 15. Initiating of ' troubleshooting' phase in discussion 1

1	.LW	Can I just come in, C- and P- ((prospective carers)) I don't know how much you've
2		heard of ((the Children's Home where the child is temporarily placed)) but it strikes
3		me that this is new information which I think you need to actually check out because
4		we've got other things coming in now, it strikes me that the lassie's got tight in with
5		the peer group-m you now, and is out of control by now and to quite an extent by the
6		sounds of it
7	SC(m)	It sounds quite frightening right enough. There are a lot of different issues there that
8		you know (.) The one thing I was going to ask, I don't want this to sound cheeky in
9		any way, but did you have much of a relationship with the lassie? ((i.e. addressed to
10		the child's social worker))

In lines 1 to 6, the liaison worker (LW) is diplomatically suggesting that the carers' confidence may be misplaced in view of new and slightly alarming information which has just emerged from her current placement. The carer, in almost obedient reply (line 7), takes a step back and changes tack to explore the quality of the social worker's relationship with her client (lines 8 to 10). From this point on, discussion 1 focused almost exclusively on problems that the proposed placement might present for the carers and their own children and the meeting in this instance concluded with a deferment of the decision for further information to be sought by the carers and their liaison worker.

Considerable time was given over in some of the sample discussions to troubleshooting sequences in which anxieties on the part of the carers were

addressed. In the course of this, information about the resource they offered would often emerge but as an incidental by-product of the process. Neither the panel members nor any other participants appeared to be intentionally seeking or examining these emergent resource properties or developing strategies and guidance that might resolve anticipated placement problems. Rather, the emphasis appeared to be on providing reassurance to the carers that the resource was valued and that their capacities as foster carers were appreciated. This quality is well illustrated in the example of discussion 6 which involved a resource that was both new to the scheme and to the liaison worker who had only very recently taken over responsibility for it. The carer was demonstrably anxious about what a scheme placement would demand of her and her family. The circumstances suggested that in this instance if no other the practitioners would be concerned to examine the capacities of the resource thoroughly and ensure appropriate support for the carers if the placement was to go ahead. This is not, in fact, what happened.

Discussion 6 included a protracted phase of 'troubleshooting' which took in turn several specific concerns and questions from the proposed carer and moved her to give an ad hoc account of how she might respond to drunk and abusive behaviour in a foster child. Figure 16 gives an extract from this sequence with the carer's account in lines 10 to 14.

Figure 16. End of 'troubleshooting' phase in discussion 6

1	SCf	Well, there was the bit about the drugs O- ((placing social worker)) what was it?
2	PC	Sniffing. Glue sniffing.
3	SCf	I was a bit concerned about that, but O-[said 'well, it was a one- off'.
4	SW	It's not a regular weekly event or anything. It's the usual, going into care and
5		everybody's glue sniffing or whatever it is they're on at the moment. And that was what
6		was happening there.
7	SCf	And the coming home drunk and that bit (.) don't think that was anything on a regular
8		basis either, that was just a one-off?
9	SW	It's been a couple, yeah.
10	SCf	If she's being abusive (.). But my experience of teenagers coming in drunk is just to put
11		them to bed and leave them and see them in the morning, you know. But I mean, if she
12		was abusive with me or roaring at me, I mean, I've got a tongue in my head, I would roar
13		back, I mean, I wouldn't stand there and take it. I think we would just have to see where it
14		went from there. I can't tell how I would -
15	PC	Yeah, it's very hard=
16		=*various people talking over.*
17	SCf	Every person's an individual, you react differently to different people.
18	PC	Yeah.

The brief but vivid account by the carer might have been taken as an opportunity to explore in more detail the carer's approach, evaluate its appropriateness for the incoming child, or advise on what the carer might do if this approach failed. Instead, the chairperson moved immediately to confirm and reassure the carer (**"Yeah, it's very hard")** and no more was said on the matter. Subsequently, the liaison worker commented on the capacities for tolerance and limit setting which the carers had apparently shown in their previous, temporary placements but again, the panel responded merely with reassurance and praise (e.g. **"you obviously stick in there, that can be so important for these children").**

Throughout the sample, the 'troubles' which troubleshooting phases mostly deal with were those that the perspective carers might face with the referred child in placement. The aim of the phases seemed to be a dual appreciation, by the carers of the fact that placements can be challenging and by the professionals of the carers themselves. They did not generally extend to devising practical strategies for responding to the challenges or providing particular forms of support to the challenged.

Phase F. Closing formalities

The final phase of the discussions, like the opening formalities, had a pronounced formula that varied only slightly from case to case. The formula consisted of each participant in turn giving an opinion on the prospective placement before the chairperson announced the corresponding recommendation and contributed a summary of his or her own. Figure 17 below summarises the variant of this formula applying in each of the sample discussions and alongside this are the verbatim terms in which the recommendation was framed.

Figure 17 Form of the Closing Formalities and the framing of the recommendation

Event	Form of the phase	Terms in which chairperson frames the recommendation
1	Chair systematically takes opinion on the placement from the prospective carers, then the social worker, panel members and liaison worker before confirming the recommendation, adding own summary and inviting placement parties to arrange introductions.	**"This is the point, then, we can say we move ahead to introductions ..."**
2	Chair systematically takes opinion on the placement from the prospective carers then the social worker, panel members and liaison worker before adding a summary, confirming the recommendation and inviting placement parties to arrange introductions.	**"Can I then say officially that we consider the match to be one we go ahead with and move ahead to introductions ..."**

3	Chair systematically takes opinion on the placement from the panel members then the social worker, current carer, liaison worker and prospective carers before confirming the recommendation and adding a summary.	**"Right ,well can I quickly summarise that the panel now go for agreeing to the match ..."**
4	Chair proposes the recommendation. Liaison worker, prospective carer, and panels members respond with their opinions which confirm it before chair makes a summary and invites parties to arrange introductions.	**"Right, I think what we've agreed is that we have to look further at the matching, I think we need to go to introductions ..."**
5	Chair makes open invitation for final questions and comments. Panel members and social worker respond before chair gives a summary, implies the recommendation in the form of her next actions and agrees to introductions being arranged immediately.	**"What happens now is I'll make a recommendation [to the Divisional Director] to approve the matching and you should hear in about a week..."**
6	Chair makes open invitation for final questions and comments and, receiving none, confirms the recommendation, gives a short summary and invites parties to arrange introductions.	**"O.K. Right ... the panel is agreeing that the match should go ahead and we wish you the very best with it."**
7	Chair makes open invitation for final questions and comments. Panel members then prospective carers, social worker and liaison worker respond before chair makes a summary in which the recommendation is implied.	**"Certainly, my feeling is 'yes' we give it a try .. and do what we can for this girl who clearly needs it"**
8	Chair proposes the recommendation and invites response from the social worker, then the prospective carers, liaison worker and panel members which confirms it before adding his own summary and inviting the parties to arrange placement introductions.	**"I think we need to agree on the timescale of the placement and the length of initial contract and things like that, and proceed to introductions...".**

Looking down the second column of figure 17 we see that in discussions 1,2, and 3, the chairperson systematically invites opinion from each participant in turn whereas in discussions 5,6, and 7, an open invitation is made and in 4 and 8 a proposition put to which the participants respond at will. The common thrust of all versions is that it is the opinion of the whole group and not merely the matching panel that bears upon the recommendation reached. Thus, the tacit rule of inclusive decision making that was invoked in the opening formalities was made explicit in the structure of the closing formalities. In discussions 3 and 6, the recommendation was announced in terms which marked the panel members as the key decision takers, "**the panel now go for agreeing to the match**", " **the panel is agreeing that the match should go ahead** ", but in the context of the complete closing formula this seemed to be no more than a slight inflection towards official policy. In practice, the authority of the matching panel was subsumed within consensus among the participant group as a whole.

The level of consensus reached at the point of the closing formalities appeared to be very high. The practitioners sometimes aired reservations over a particular aspect of the proposed placement, and this is something that will be covered in more detail in

the next chapter, but there was no instance in the sample of expressed dissent from the general proposition that the placement should proceed. The practitioners consistently realised the outcome that the opening formalities had indicated to be the preferred one. Furthermore, at the end of each matching meeting, the social worker, liaison worker and prospective carers concerned met to arrange placement introduction as the chairpeople at the outset of discussion suggested they might do and as they were commonly invited to do following its closing (eg. "**we can clear the room a little to leave a smaller group to do the next bit which is actually working out the 'hows' and 'whens' of the introductions**"; "**those who are going to arrange the introductions can retire and go ahead and do that**"; "Usually what would happen is that you would meet ((after this meeting)) to set up")

Officially, a senior official had to accept and endorse the recommendation before it could be implemented but only one of the chairpeople made any reference to this procedure. The chairperson of discussion 5 informed the meeting that she would be making a recommendation to her Divisional Director. What followed, however, was the exchange shown in figure 18 which immediately undercut the formal procedure and allowed this meeting to end much as the others did with immediate steps being taken to set the placement in train.

Figure 18. Extract from the closing formalities of Discussion 5

PC:	What happens now is that I'll make a recommendation to B- ((Divisional Director)) and you should hear within about a week the time of the (.) that she comes to you.
SW:	So (.) we can't set things up, can we?
PC:	Well, informally 'yes'. *(Tittering within group)*
PC:	But don't take it as a decision. It's not right in front of you. *(More tittering)*

The italicised observational notes made on the transcript extract in figure 18 about the behaviour of the group reveal a degree of subterfuge being practised by the participants such that while paying lip service to the formal procedure the general understanding is that it need not seriously interfere with their next actions. A very strong suggestion in the data was that the likelihood of the matching process failing to deliver the preferred outcome was very low and that the protocol of validation by a senior officer was a mere formality.

Turning now to the terms in which the recommendations were cast (third column of figure 17), we see an curious use of language. The chairpeople speak not of approving a 'placement' but of the 'match' or 'matching' and sometimes simply of 'moving ahead to introductions' and these convention were difficult to interpret in the context of the structural analysis of the discussions. While the terms 'match' and 'matching' imply a narrow focus on the correspondence between referral and resource there were no phases in the discussions where this correspondence could be seen to be being examined. The matching talk in general had seemed to embrace the more inclusive concept of a placement with its ramifications for family contact, educational provision, administrative matters internal to the agency and so on. The phrase 'moving ahead to introductions' implies that all obstacles to a placement have been resolved. Yet, the data suggested that the wider placement arrangements and issues were not expected to be necessarily resolved or concluded upon in a matching meeting.

I have noted that the phases of matching were neither self-contained not comprehensive in their particular focus. New information about the referral, the resource or the required placement terms might emerge at any point in the course of a discussion but, even in the 'focus on prospective placement' and 'troubleshooting' phases these were seldom translated into precise placement planning. This tendency continued well into the closing formalities such that in discussion 3, for example, the child's sense of being punished by being in care was brought into the frame by her social worker for the first time after the recommendation had been announced. In the very last moments of discussion 7, the chairperson raised the issue of the tasks for the placement and asked for suggestions on this theme which he could include in "the paperwork" he would be completing once the meeting was over. No suggestions were made. In discussion 8, the chairperson remarked in his summary that **"I think we need to agree on the timescale of placement and the length of initial contract and stuff"** and in the absence of further discussion on the matter proposed **"a year minimum and moving forward on that basis"**. His proposition was left hanging without further debate as he invited the parties to the placement to begin organising placement introductions.

The function of the 'closing formalities' was self-evidently that of concluding the formal matching discussion. It appears, however, that it did not extend to being conclusive on the issue of how well the proposed placement was likely to meet the requirements of the child in all particulars. Given that the practitioners began preparations to introduce the child into the placement as soon as the formal matching meetings ended, the implication is that residual placement issues were to be addressed one way or another some time after that, if at all.

6.4 Summary of Findings on the Sequence, Form and Function of the Discursive Phases

The analysis of the typical structure of phases has highlighted some key features of the decision making process. Traversing eight stages in succession, the process was launched, sought information on the child's particulars from the social worker and current carer, sifted out salient points of information and interpreted them, considered some aspects of the form the prospective placement might take, took in a perspective from the prospective carers, reassured them over any particular challenges they foresaw in the placement and concluded with a consensual recommendation which effectively set the placement imminently in train. The whole was apparently underpinned by implicit rules of spontaneity, whole group consensus and a preferred outcome. These rules produced an informal and unstructured quality of exchange between participants that nevertheless succeeded in delivering a decision that the placement should proceed. There was no discernible phase dealing specifically with the properties and qualities of the placement resource as such nor any which concluded on the precise details of the proposed placement with respect to its terms and content in relation to the particular needs of the individual child concerned.

We shall now look at the general shape of the content of discussions that the structure and form of the phases gave rise to.

6.5. THE OVERALL SUBSTANTIVE CONTENT OF THE PRACTICE

An analysis was made of the substantive content of the eight discussions to establish the typical scope and balance of their subject matter. The method of analysis involved recording and classifying topics on their first recognisable appearance in each separate text irrespective of the attention they subsequently received in the discussion. The resultant list was then compared between texts and refined accordingly prior to assigning each topic to one of three over-arching categories suggested by the theoretical model of matching; namely,user-related, resource-related and planning-related topics. Deciding when a topic changed or was merely being adapted or embellished was at times a matter of very fine judgement which drew heavily on the analyst's familiarity with local linguistic practices, on the one hand, and clues in the text on the other. For example, an utterance such as **"what about the family bit?"** might have been difficult to interpret unequivocally as reference to an incident in the child's family background, in one instance, and the present family relationships, in another, had native competence and close attention to the context of each utterance not been features of the methodology. Even with this concentration on the situated meaning of utterances, however, it has to be acknowledged that the method was valid only for the broad overview of the discussions that was attempted at this stage of the study.

6.5.1 The Range and Balance of Topics on the Agenda

Sixty-four different topics were identified and figure 19 below shows how they were distributed between those that appeared most strongly to relate to aspects of the user, those related to aspects of the resource and its properties and those which concerned forward planning for the placement or the case in general. A full list of the topics recognised is provided in tables 6-8 in Appendix E at the end of the thesis.

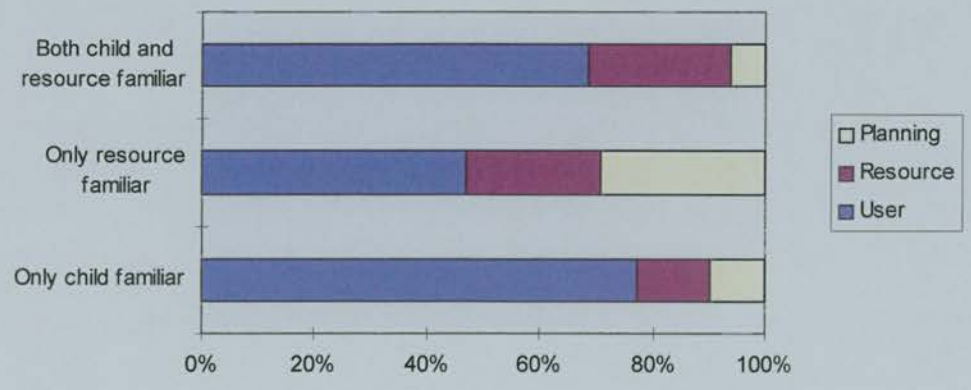
Figure 19. Number and proportion of topics in each subject category for whole sample.

All topics		USER-related		RESOURCE-related		PLANNING-related	
N	% all topics	*N*	% all topics	*N*	% all topics	*N*	% all topics
64	100	43	69	12	19	9	14

The findings tabulated in figure 19 show the overall range of subject matter raised for discussion to have been apparently dominated by user-related topics with resource-related and planning-related topics seeming to have a much lower profile.

The aggregation of topics across the sample, however, might have been concealing important variations in the balance of topics between the discussions. For instance, discussions involving panels that were unfamiliar with the child's case may have had more need of details about the child than those to whom she was already known to some extent. Details of the resource and planning may have had a proportionately more prominent place in discussions in which panels already held information about the child. There were three types of matching event in the sample which allowed this proposition to be tested; those held in districts from which both referral and resource originated and were therefore fairly familiar to the panel (events 2, 3,4 and 8), those held in districts from which only the resource originated with the corresponding familiarity of this and unfamiliarity of the child's case (events 1, 5 and 6), and a single meeting in a district from which only the referral originated and was familiar to the panel (event 7). The balance of topics in each of these meetings was compared and the results are shown in the bar chart in figure 20 which is based on figures set out in table 2 of Appendix E.

Fig. 20. Balance of topics compared between discussions where panel was familiar with both child and resource (first bar), familiar only with the resource (second bar) or familiar with only the child (third bar).



The results of the comparison between the three types of meeting and displayed in figure 20 showed the child to be the dominant focus of interest whatever relationship the panel had to the case and the resource. The range of user-related topics raised (blue portion) consistently surpassed the range of topics in the other categories and this suggests the presence of a basic practice convention rather than a phenomenon which arose from the different characteristics of individual matching events.

The convention was not invariable, however. The extent to which the child dominated the breadth of discussion varied between the meetings in a way contrary to expectations. Where the panel had some prior knowledge of the child's case, (first and third bars of figure 20) the relative proportion of topics related to this was actually greater than where the case was previously unknown (second bar). Similarly, prior knowledge of the resource (first and second bars) was associated with a relatively higher proportion of resource-related topics being discussed than where the resource was previously unknown. What these findings suggested was that, in following the convention of talking more broadly about the child, they were also focusing on familiar territory rather than turning their attention to aspects of the proposed placement which required detailed exploration.

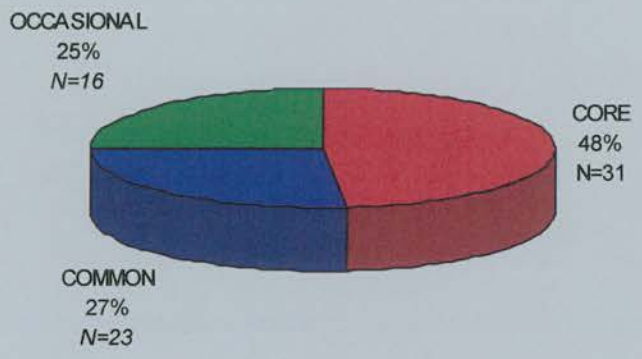
6.5.2 The Standardisation of the Agenda

Taking the analysis further, the study looked at the standardisation of the topics by counting the number of meetings in which each topic occurred at least once. Topics that occurred in six or more of the eight discussions were classified as 'core' topics and conceptualised analytically as matters that the practitioners routinely treated as indispensable to matching irrespective of the details of the case at hand. Topics that occurred in four to six discussions were classified as 'common' and, being only semi-standardised, could be seen as matters which practitioners treated as legitimate but not essential to raise. Topics which occurred in fewer than four discussions were classified as 'occasional' and conceived as case sensitive matters which the practitioners were moved to discuss by virtue of the particulars of the case at hand. The patterns of occurrence were then compared in a variety of ways in order to establish the profile of subject matter which was most and least standard and which,

therefore, practitioners took to be most and least pertinent to the generality of matching.

Firstly, a comparison was made between the proportions of core, common and occasional topics in the sample to show the general complexion of the agenda of discussion. The results of this are shown in pie chart in figure 21, which is based on table 3 in Appendix E. Figure 21 uses a colour coding of red for core topics, blue for common topics and green for occasional topics which is continued in subsequent figures showing the findings of this wave of analysis.

Fig.21 Relative proportion of core, common and occasional topics in the sample (*N* = 64)

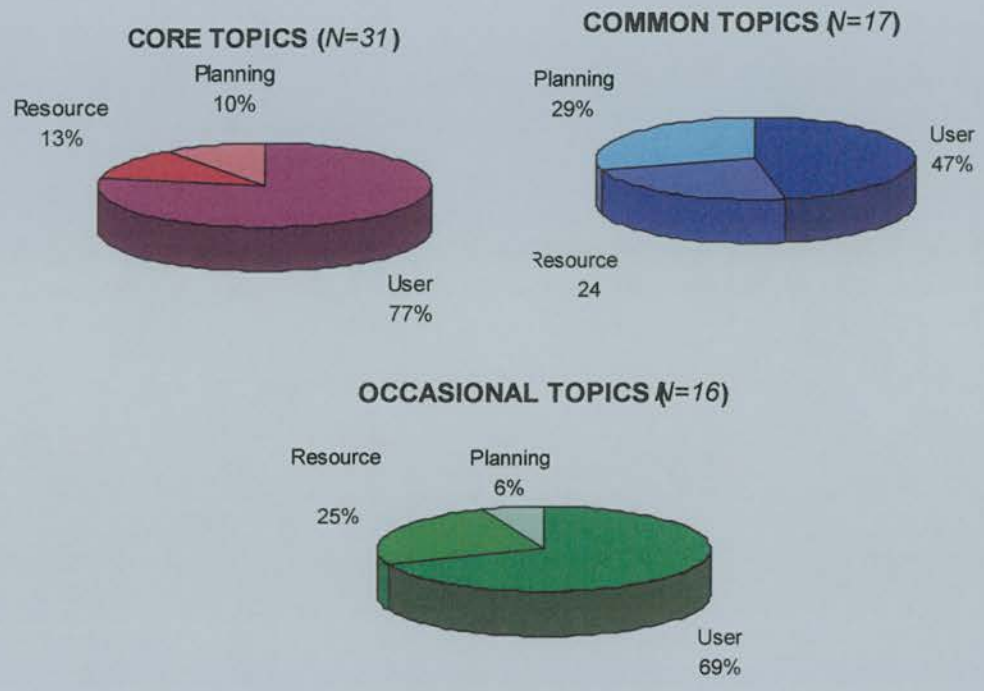


As we see in figure 21, nearly half (48%) of all the topics raised in the discussions as a whole were core topics (red portion) common to almost all the discussions and just over a quarter (27%) more were common to at least half of them (blue portion). There was thus a marked degree of standardisation in the range of topics raised for discussion in the sample. Only a quarter of the recognised topics were in the occasional range (green portion) where the more individualised, case sensitive topics were to be found.

A second treatment of the frequency data correlated topic categories and frequencies to reveal in broad terms of what the standardised, semi-standardised and case-sensitive elements of the agenda comprised. Each of the pie charts in figure 22 below represents one of the frequency bands and shows the proportions of user,

resource and planning-related topics in each. The charts are drawn from table 4 in Appendix E.

Figure.22. Balance between user, resource and planning related topics in core, common and occasional ranges.all texts

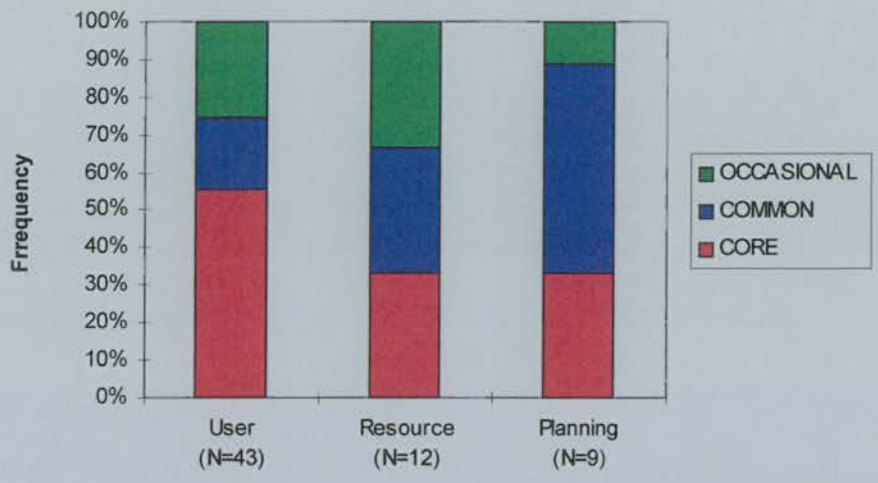


The findings from this comparison showed both the standard and case sensitive elements of the agenda to comprise predominantly of topics pertaining to the child. Seventy-seven per cent of core topics (red pie of figure 22) and sixty-nine per cent of occasional topics (green pie) were user-related. Resource and planning topics jointly made up only twenty-three per cent of the core frequency and thirty-one per cent of the occasional frequency. The semi-standard element of the agenda was more balanced in that the proportion of user-related topics in the common frequency (blue pie) fell to less than half (47%) with resource topics making up twenty-four per cent and planning topics twenty-nine per cent.

Tracking the changing proportions of the three categories of topics through the three different frequencies in figure 22, we can see that user-related topics had their most emphatic presence in the standard element of the agenda which comprised the largest

overall number of topics. Planning topics had their most emphatic presence in the smaller, semi-standard element and resource topics seemed to increase as a proportion of each element as the level of standardisation decreased. The implications of this for the place user-, resource- and planning-related topics held in the agenda of discussion was examined by taking the topic categories as the critical variable and comparing their distribution across the three frequencies. The results are shown in Figure 23 below (from table 5, Appendix E). Each column of the chart in figure 23 represents one of the three topic categories and shoes its distribution between core (red), common (blue) and occasional (green) frequencies.

Figure 23. Balance between core, common and occasional topics in each of the user, resource and planning-related groups



The findings displayed in figure 23 show user-related topics (first column) to have been the most standardised of the three subject categories with 55% of them occurring in more than six of the eight discussions (i.e. core range). A further nineteen per cent were semi-standardised being common to at least four of the discussions (common range). Only twenty-six per cent of user-related topics appeared to arise from the particulars of the case at hand in that they occurred in fewer than half of the sample discussions (occasional range). The implications is that the practitioners were generally raising much the same range of issues in relation to the child and that these were considered by them to be essential ingredients of matching decision making.

The profile of the much smaller range of resource-related topics (second column) is very different. These topics were distributed evenly between the standard, semi-standard and case-sensitive elements of the agenda (33.3r% in each frequency). As such, they had the highest proportion in the occasional range of all subject groups suggesting that resource issues were the more likely to be prompted by the particulars of the case at hand. Overall, it seems that with the exception of a very small and select group of core matters, talking about the resource was not deemed essential to the decision making unless some particular aspect of the case made it so.

Findings on the planning-related topics, the smallest group of topics, confirmed that they were predominantly semi-standardised; fifty-six per cent of them occurred at the common frequency. Thirty-three per cent of the planning topics showed a higher degree of standardisation by occurring at the core range. When this proportion is translated into an actual number of topics, however, we find that only three planning topics occurred so routinely as to be understood as essential to decision making in the setting. The eleven per cent of planning topics in the occasional range translates as two actual topics that arose from case specific circumstances. The general profile of planning issues in the practice examined shows them to have been not only very limited in scope but also legitimate rather than essential in the decision making process.

6.5.3 Summary of findings on the Typical Substantive Content of the Practice

The profile of the substantive content to emerge from the topic survey shows the child to be the dominant focus of attention in the practice irrespective of the other variables considered. The range of topics raised in this connection was broad and highly standardised. Covering the particulars of the child and her circumstances in detail seemed to be accepted in the setting as essential to matching decision making.

Aspects of the resource and planning appeared to be of more peripheral concern. The topics raised in relation to them were small in number and their range was less standardised across the sample than user-related topics. Resource topics were more contingent on case particulars than either of the other topic types implying a degree of particularisation in this areas which did not apply where the child or planning was being talked about. Certain planning topics made a common appearance but the fact that only nine topics related to any aspect of planning could be recognised in the talk data suggests that planning was a very limited aspect of the process.

A further finding which may have significance for the process of matching in the setting was that practitioners raised more topics about the child or the resource when the matching panel were already to some extent familiar with them. This hinted at a lack of enthusiasm for exploring unknown quantities.

6.6 The Task-related Shape of the Practice Compared with the Model

The chapter has examined the task-related shape of the practice by reference to its typical sequence of phases and general substantive content. In the course of this certain characteristics of the practice have emerged that indicate something of its nature and provide for a degree of comparison between it and the theoretical model. In concluding this part of the study, I highlight particular points of convergence and divergence between the practice and the model and suggest inferences that can be drawn from these about the extent to which the practice realised the agency's ambition of child-centredness in decision making about AFS placements.

At first glance, the practice bore some resemblance to the overall decision-making dynamic of the model. In both, the order of discussion began with a focus on the child and proceeded from here to address the nature of the resource allocated, potential placement problems and issues of planning. In the model this dynamic would apply to a series of items based on research findings about placement quality whereas in the practice, the dynamic arose from a sequence of eight phases of

discussion each of which took a different focus and form. The resemblance did not persist, however, when these phases of discussion were examined in more detail. The practice appeared to diverge from the model in three crucial respects; the extent to which the child's placement requirements were made explicit and clear, the extent to which the properties of the resource were examined in relation to these requirements and the degree of attention given to placement planning in the round.

The model accommodates the circumstances of very limited resource choice that applied in the setting and assumes that the purpose of matching in these circumstances can only amount to verifying the degree of correspondence between a child placement requirements and the properties of whatever resource is available. It proceeds on the principle that the child's interests can only be served if the requirements are clearly specified and the particular characteristics of the resource thoroughly examined in relation to them. From the structural analysis of the practice, by contrast, it was far from clear where and even if the practitioners were identifying a set of placement requirements against which the merits of the resource could have been assessed. Early phases of discussion elicited information about the child and her background circumstances by questions put to the social worker and a subjective, anecdotal report from the current carer. This supplemented the information in the background papers which, as we saw in chapter five, was very limited. Yet these early phases exhibited nothing of the systematic progress through evidence, issues and decisions advocated in the model. Rather, they concentrated on description and passed without apparently crystallising what is was that this particular child required from the placement being considered. The child continued to be a dominant subject of discussion throughout the discussions and a considerable number and range of child-related topics were raised as a result. The consistency of a particular selection of topics across the sample was such as to suggest a core agenda of decision making in which the child's particulars were the central element. Periodically, practitioners could be seen to be selectively working on and interpreting the emergent details but the discussion tended to run on phase after phase without pause to reflect on and

summarise whatever conclusions had been reached by the sifting and synthesis process in which the discussants had engaged.

As with the child's requirements, the structural analysis did not identify where or even if the properties of the resource were being examined to any extent at all. Topics recognisably relating to the resource were few in number and highly case-specific in range. Coverage of resource particulars seemed to be both a marginal component of the core decision making agenda and an activity which was contingent upon the different characteristics of individual cases. There was one notable exception to this pattern of dealing with resource issues that became apparent in the analysis of phase form and function. In both 'focus to resource' and 'troubleshooting phases', there appeared to be an abiding concern with the prospective carers' recognition of and confidence about probable challenges inherent in the placement. This concern appeared not to extend to assessing precisely what the challenges signified in terms of the child's needs, what strategies might be adopted in respect of them or what help would be available to the carers in the event that any particular difficulty manifested itself. Rather, the function of these phases seemed directed more to a simple reassurance that the carers were appreciated by the professionals of the agency and had the capacity to rise to whatever challenges the placement might present them with.

The central problematic of decision making in the model is whether, given the particular strengths and weaknesses of the resource at hand, foreseeable risks in the placement and the provision of appropriate supplementary and supportive interventions, an available placement could be made to fit the child's needs and requirements. In addition to a thorough examination of strengths, weaknesses and risks, therefore, planning of placement terms and conditions is an essential ingredient of good matching practice. There was very little evidence of planning in the practice and very few topics related to it were raised by the practitioners. The phases of discussion, even that focusing specifically on the prospective placement, tended to merge seamlessly into the next phase without any apparent attempt being made to

summarise the matters they had covered and pin down any details of the prospective placement that had been mooted. This tendency continued into the closing formalities of the discussions where recommendations were made for placements to proceed whether or not the details of their terms and conditions had been fully discussed far less explicitly agreed upon.

The analysis identified three tacit rules underpinning the practice; rules of spontaneity, preferred outcome and full consensus. The rule of spontaneity eschewed adherence to a disciplined agenda of discussion on the premise that this would inhibit discussion. Practitioners were invited to contribute ad hoc as things occurred to them and the lack of obvious system in the discussions can be attributed to this rule. On the basis of the findings in this study thus far, the rule of spontaneity appeared to be rather ineffective in its own terms. Discussion appears to have been very far from comprehensive, particularly with respect to the range and depth with which the resource was considered and the extent to which a placement recommendation was founded on sound and detailed planning. Moreover, the logic of the decision making and the rationale for the recommendation was obscured by the discursive anarchy. Given that minutes were not routinely made of matching meetings and, as we saw in chapter five, tended to be very brief when they were made, there was ample opportunity for practitioners to leave the meetings with disparate understandings of the basis on which the recommendations had been made.

The rule of a preferred outcome, signalled in the introductory remarks made by the chairpeople and confirmed in the custom of prearranging placement preparation meetings to follow immediately on from matching meetings, privileged the option of finding the placement matched. This rule appeared to work very effectively in practice in that every discussion in the sample concluded, eventually, with a recommendation of this kind. Yet, the effectiveness may have been at some cost to the quality of the decision making because when one outcome is privileged a disproportionate weight of evidence is required to argue against it. One might question where the incentive to mount such a contrary case might have come from in

the setting. Discussion appears to have concentrated on the child whose general suitability for the type of placement at issue had already been established by a referral panel. The child's social worker had already met with the prospective carers and their liaison worker and, presumably, would not have proceeded to a matching meeting had they not had some investment in the preferred outcome. The role of the independent matching panel was therefore the pivotal one if an impartial approach was to be taken to the evidence for or against a recommendation to place and this role was blurred by the third tacit rule of the practice, decision by full consensus.

Although the matching panel was officially charged with responsibility for the recommendation, the practice appeared to give the opinion of all participants more or less equal validity. This was particularly evident in the custom of taking soundings from each participant in turn in the closing formalities of the process but was apparent also in the general consensual and inclusive tenor of the discussions. Even modest expressions of dissent were rare and there was also a suggestion in the findings of the topics analysis that the practitioners tended to keep to relatively familiar subject matter rather than delve into lesser known territory where the risk of finding contentious evidence may have been greater. It seemed that that panel members and other practitioners alike were mindful of the risk to achieving consensus if any of them took an obvious departure from the prevailing view.

Consensus was uniformly achieved in the sample discussions along with spontaneity and arrival at the preferred outcome but this may have been at the expense of a thorough examination of the issues. Moreover, the consensus was being built in the absence of the central party to the proposed placement, the child and parents, who were excluded from the matching meetings and had yet to give direct expression to their opinion of it. The practice was clearly child-*focused* in the substance of discussion but it could not, yet, be said to be child-*centred* where this means attending to the child's placement interests as the priority over other considerations. Preoccupation with details of the child may have merely given practitioners the

illusion of child-centred decision-making when, in fact, the priorities of decision-making lay elsewhere.

The method of matching employed in the study setting was clearly a very different one from that represented in the theoretical model and appeared to lack some crucial ingredients of good practice. However, the birds-eye view of it provided by the structural analysis shows little of *how* issues in relation to the child, the resource and planning *were talked about* and it may have been in this dimension that stronger evidence of child-centred practice could be found. The next chapter examines the substantive content of the practitioners' talk in more detail and, by reference to the standards set by the theoretical model, evaluates the apparent priorities of the practice in relation to its own aspirations of child-centredness.

Chapter 7.

THE PRIORITIES OF DECISION MAKING IN PRACTICE

7.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses findings from phase IV of data analysis, which focused on the topics raised and developed by the practitioners in their matching discussion. It takes forward the issues raised by the structural analysis of these discussions in respect of the extent to which the practice was, in its own terms, child-centred and does so by reference to a range of standards drawn from the theoretical model. A simplified version of the theoretical model is set out in Appendix A at the end of the thesis.

The process of analysis was to some extent dictated by the structural findings. It was clearly not logical to attempt a point by point comparison between the practice and the model because they were already known to diverge in several important ways. The practice did not follow an orderly progress from one completed agenda item to another as the model is designed to do and there was strong evidence to suggest that the substantive content of the practice did not conform to that prescribed by the model. To accommodate these factors, each item on the model agenda was reframed as a set of modest standards from which arose analytical questions that it was possible to address in relation to the study data. These questions were then addressed by sifting through all the segments of text classified as user-, resource- or planning-related topics, identifying those that seemed most relevant to each standard and examining them closely. The examination considered the incidence of the topics across the sample, the extent to which they were discussed and, above all, the apparent emphases that emerged in discussion of them. By this means, it was possible to expose the issues the practitioners took to be most salient to the matching of placements and make an evaluation of how child-centred they seemed to be.

The findings are discussed in sections 7.2 to 7.10 under section headings mirroring the model agenda items as follows;

Section 7.2. The child's family background, the reasons for and the objectives of the placement
Section 7.3. Maintaining and enhancing the child's important relationships
Section 7.4. The child's care history and its implications for the future placement
Section 7.5. The child's individual needs and strengths and the related requirements of the placement
Section 7.6. Addressing specific behavioural and related emotional problems
Section 7.7. Promoting the child's educational continuity and attainment
Section 7.8. Promoting the child's health and personal development
Section 7.9. Views of the parties to the placement
Section 7.10. Summary of decisions made and contingency planning

Each set of findings will be prefaced by the model standard and the analytical questions arising from it. The relevant practice topics will be set out in their subject categories and their incidence across the sample is colour coded as before and the actual number of discussions in which each topic was recognised will also be indicated. (The full range of topics recognised in the data is shown in Appendix E).

The sample discussions will be identified by their code number (1-8) and the sample cases by the name given in the study to the child. The following transcription symbols and speaker codes used in the previous chapter are also used for the illustrative extracts in this.

Transcription Symbols

[	Left brackets indicate the point at which a current speaker's talk is overlapped by another speaker's talk
=	Equal signs, one at the end of a line and one at the beginning, indicate no gap between the two lines of speech
(.)	A dot in parenthesis indicates a short pause between a speaker's utterances
(?)	A question mark in parenthesis indicates transcriber's inability to hear what was said
(word)	Parenthesised words are possible hearings or interpretations
((word))	Double parenthesis indicates transcriber's descriptions rather than transcriptions

Abbreviations for speakers in data extracts

PC	Panel Chairperson
PM1,2 etc	Panel members in order of speaking
SW	Child's Social Worker
CC	Child's current foster carer or residential key worker
LW	Liaison Worker
SCf	Female AFS carer providing the proposed placement
SCm	Male AFS carer providing the proposed placement

The chapter concludes, in section 7.11, with a summary of the findings and their implications for the quality of the practice.

7.2. CHILD'S FAMILY BACKGROUND, REASONS FOR AND OBJECTIVES OF PLACEMENT

The model standards and focus of analysis

The theoretical model of matching begins by establishing a clear and common understanding among the decision makers of the need for and objectives of the proposed placement and the circumstances in the child's life from which they arise. The evaluation of resource properties can then proceed in this frame of reference and potential incompatibilities with the child's requirements identified and reduced as the process of matching continues. Particular issues which decision makers should be alert to at the outset are vague placement terms which could lead to drift in the care plan and sophisticated objectives, such as assessment or treatment, that could require more than the resources of the proposed carers to fulfil.

The structural analysis of the practice has established that reference to the child's circumstances tended to continue sporadically throughout the discussions and that there were no phases in which the placement's objectives and terms were specifically set out and agreed. Yet the practitioners did talk about these matters and the analysis of the practice topics raised in this connection sought to examine the following general question,

- what did the discussion on these topics appear to contribute to the decision making in terms of accounting for the need for the placement and what it was expected to achieve for the child?

Figure 1. Practice topics relating to family background, reasons for and objectives of proposed placement

(red = core range, blue = common range, green = occasional range)

User-related	*Planning-related*
Family structure, history and circumstances (8)	Duration of prospective placement (5)
Family dynamics and relationships (8)	Reunification of child with own family (4)
Problems in family (8)	Placement tasks (4)
Child's relationships with parent/s (8)	
Child's relationship with siblings (6)	
Process of/ reason for admission to care (6)	
Parent/s personality and/or parenting skills (5)	
Child's relationship with step-parent/cohabitee 5)	
Child's relationship with absent father (3)	
Child's relationships with extended family (3)	

We recall from the structural analysis in the previous chapter that at the outset of the discussions, in the Focus on the child phase, social workers were merely asked to sketch in the background to the referral. There was apparently no expectation of a more comprehensive account of the background to the referral. Questions on the child's background also occurred in subsequent phases of the discussions with the result that her history before and after social worker intervention tended to emerge in the form of isolated snapshots. This is a difficult phenomenon to illustrate economically with the data but figure 2 attempts to do so by taking one discussion, noting the background information that was imparted in each main phase of the discussion and showing where the focus shifted away from and back to it as the meeting progressed (indicated by italics).

Figure 2. Categories of background information imparted in each phase of discussion 5

Phase	Background details shared and shift of topic (in italics)
Focus to child	That the family lurches from crisis to crisis, with anecdotes and examples. Events precipitating child's reception into care and subsequent placement told as short narrative. *Reference to child's request in background papers to type of foster placement she would like.*
Focus on Current placement	*Brief account of child's behaviour in the placement and its implications for a future placement.* *Question about how much child had been told about prospective placement and whether any family member would attempt to sabotage the placement.* More illustrations of family crises and problematic relationships between family members. Brief reference to care history
Focus on prospective placement	*More illustrations of child's behaviour in current placement and its possible implications for future placement.* Child's feelings about her own family. More details about family members and their relationships with each other. Reference to fact that this is child's first care episode.

Focus to resource	More information about the circumstances leading up to referral. *About child's personality and general demeanour.* *Anticipation of potential issues that might emerge in future placement.* *Prospective carers views on child and prospect of placement.* *Contact with family from placement.* Mother's feelings about future placement and more information on family relationships. *Distance between placement and home.* *Carers' experience of fostering and potential impact of placement on their own children.* *Future Placement duration.* More anecdotal information about relationship between child and mother.
Closing formalities	*Carers' response to this information.* *Participants views on prospective placement* *Benefits for child of ordinary family life represented by placement resource.* *Agreement to proceed with planning for placement introductions.*

The background information delivered in the sketches and snapshots tended to focus almost exclusively on past, present and potential future problem areas in the child's family such that the emergent images of the families were consistently and unremittingly negative. Reports of historical instability and currently dysfunctional relationships, sibling rivalry, lack of discipline or physical affection and parental inability or unwillingness to meet the child's needs overwhelmed the occasional reference to family warmth and strengths. When such references were made, even these were qualified such that they almost ceased to appear positive at all (e.g. SW: "They all love their Mum, they do. But, I mean, there's anger that they don't get in touch with because Mum becomes so angry herself that if you get cross with your Mum you have to be prepared for a real onslaught back").

The focus of discussion also tended to train narrowly on the nuclear family as presently constituted in the child's home. There was very little evidence in the sample of any attention being paid to the child's wider kinship circle or family friends. Extended family members were mentioned in only three discussions where they had had a very recent and central role in the child's care; the grandparents in cases 1 and 5 and an aunt in case 7. None of the sample children had families in which their birth parents still lived together and absent fathers generally received very little attention in the discussions; only three addressed the birth father-child relationship. Stepfathers and cohabitees, on the other hand, were prominent in five discussions where their

problematic relationship with the child and the difficulties this caused for the child were factors in the reasons given for the referral.

In the light of the accounts given of the child's background, the case for continued substitute care for her virtually made itself. Certainly, there was very little discussion indeed of why the referral had been made and two of the discussions did not cover this topic at all. To the extent that the reasons for or circumstances of the referral were accounted for, these too had an air of inevitability about them. Seven of the eight sample children were in temporary placements that required a further move of placement if the child was not to be returned home. Where the current placement was residential, the argument that it was an unsatisfactory setting for the child in question added impetus and urgency to the social worker's argument, (e.g. SW: "a children's home is clearly not where she should be"; SW: ""She just doesn't cope in a residential setting"). The most urgent case of all was perhaps that in discussion 4 where the child was having to be moved from a current AFS placement which the carers had given notice to end. Such cases had automatic priority in the scheme. Irrespective of other case details, all the children were perceived by their social workers to need a planned placement in a family setting. Being the principal route to such placements for teenagers, the referral to the AFS was presented by the social workers and apparently accepted unquestioningly by the other discussants as axiomatic.

An initially surprising finding, in view of the emphasis given in the discussions to family problems, was the near absence in the data of any reference to the work the social workers were doing with the family and where the intervention of planned foster care fitted with this. There was only one instance where any account of this was given and then only very superficially. In discussion 3, the social worker explained that she was seeking a placement of about six months. Care was to be shared with the child's mother to allow her to separate from her partner and set up a new home for herself, the child and possibly also her new partner. The plan was that the child would remain in care until this was accomplished but for her own needs, required to be placed elsewhere than in a residential setting. It was only in this discussion,

furthermore, that the reasons for referral were questioned. The child was reported to be very distressed that she could not be with her mother and twice during the course of the discussions the chairperson politely challenged the basis for the referral with the questions "But why don't we just send Molly home to her mum?" and "Should we not, then, be sending Molly home?". Despite the chairperson's evident disquiet, the proposed placement was ultimately recommended and an explanation was sought for this outcome in the follow-up interviews for the study. It was in this context that the chairperson explained his own conduct during the discussion and the existence of an unwritten rule of the matching practice that accounted for the lack of discussion in it about the basis for the referral. Quite simply, the rule specified that social workers should not be required to justify their referral in matching meetings because this was the task of the earlier Referral Meeting. The findings on the practice suggest that the general effect of the rule's proscription was to create a *cordon sanitaire* around case particulars and limit the focus of discussion to a fairly superficial exchange of information. It also meant that panel members, who unlike the social worker, liaison worker and prospective carers would not normally have discussed the case before the meeting, were denied the opportunity to fully appraise themselves of the case before forming a view on the prospective placement.

The findings in relation to discussion of the objectives and terms of the proposed placement suggested that clarity on these was not a priority for the practice. The issue of placement duration was raised in only five of the discussions and related to the prospects for reunification in only four of these (see the topics listed under the planning-related heading in the second column of figure 1). In none of the sample discussions did the social worker offer a clear vision of when and in what circumstances the child might return home and therefore what duration of placement would be appropriate. At the end of discussion 3 in which the relatively short 'bridging' placement was considered, the issue of placement duration was resolved by the chairperson with the words "let's say six months and reviewable thereafter" following a brief debate between the social worker who felt that six months would be long enough and the liaison worker who argued that twelve months would be more

suitable for the carers. In the other discussions, the duration of the placement was apparently left to resolve itself in the fullness of time. Figure 4 shows a fairly typical extract of talk on placement duration and family reunification that characteristically concludes not with a decision but a change of topic. In lines 1 and 4 we see a panel member (PM) inferring that reunification is part of the care plan. In lines 10 to 11 the social worker contradicts this inference and summarises the problems involved. The discussion then moves immediately on to other matters and the issue of placement duration was not raised again.

Figure 3. Family reunification and placement duration from Discussion 4

1	PM	But the plan is that she'll return home at some point, is that what (.)?
2	SW	No, not straight away. It's not anticipated that (.). It's difficult to see a situation were
3		Mum is sufficiently strong. She's not going to be sufficiently strong to cope with a
4		demanding teenager
5	PM	I'd thought I'd picked up from you that's what had been, um, ... *(possibly from previous*
6		*exchange about improvements at home and mother and child talking about a review)*
7	SW	Well, I think the reality of it is that Christine will return home but I think that, er, for her
8		to return home full time I certainly would have no confidence in the situation lasting
9		any more than a very short period of time.
10	PC	The problem will be getting Christine to return home in a positive way rather than in a
11		situation that she has forced by being difficult where she was. *Discussion moves on to*
12		*topic of child's behaviour.*

Across the sample, placement terms other than duration, such as those concerning contact and education, tended to be left equally open-ended as we shall see when they are discussed in later sections of the chapter.

Placement objectives, at least in the form of general aspirations to provide the child with a certain quality of care, could be inferred from the discussions but the social workers were not asked to state them. A word-by-word scan of the sample transcripts revealed not a single instance of the word 'objective' being used. There was one instance of a social worker being asked a question that may have alluded to placement objectives, namely "What would you be looking for Molly?", and placement tasks were referred to in four discussions either explicitly (e.g. "What are the tasks for this placement?") or by implication (e.g. "Is this something you expect the carers to take on?"). The references to tasks tended to relate to specific aspects of the placements such as how the child's behaviour was to be managed or special arrangements to be made for placement introductions, rather than its overall objectives. The strategic aims

of the placements remained implicit and even in the closing formalities, as we shall see, little attempt was made to articulate them in a way that ensured all involved in the placement shared the same understanding and expectations of them.

To give shape to the study sample discussed in Chapter 4, placement objectives and terms were inferred from the meeting data, validated with the follow-up interview data and classified according to definitions applied by Rowe *et al.* (1989) to their own data. The results of this procedure are re-tabulated in figure 4 below to provide a reference point for the findings discussed throughout this chapter. The fact that the inferred objectives and terms had to be verified through individual interviews highlights their lack of clarity in the matching discussions. Whether the practitioners who were not interviewed would recognise the inferences in figure 4 and whether they represent common understandings on which the actual decision making was based cannot be known.

Figure 4. Summary of inferred placement objectives and terms following Rowe *et al.* (1989)

Child	Terms and objectives of placement
'Care and upbringing', and 'assessment'.	
7 Melissa 13yrs 7mo.	Indeterminate length of placement to provide security, consistent care and firm limits on behaviour and movements to and from home. Ideally return home in due course.
8 Carole 13yrs 7mo.	Indeterminate length of placement to allow situation at home to be further investigated and resolved. Ideally return home in due course.
'Care and upbringing', and 'treatment'	
1 Lesley 12yrs 9mo.	Provide secure and stable home probably throughout remainder of childhood. Address challenging behaviour.
4 Christine 13yrs 11mo.	Indeterminate length of placement to provide security and stability in care and control pending more satisfactory conditions for return of child home. Address challenging behaviour and possible past sexual abuse.
'Care and upbringing'	
6 Laura 14 yrs.	Indefinite length of placement to provide security, stability and support for schooling. Return home unlikely due to step-father's attitude.
3 Molly 13yrs 8 mo.	Six month, possibly longer placement to allow mother to re-settle herself and to provide child with stability meantime. Shared care with mother. Return home as soon as possible.
'Care and upbringing' and possibly 'bridge to independence'	
5 Linda 15yrs 1mo.	Indeterminate length of placement to provide emotional security and consistency and support for schooling. Ideally return home in due course but otherwise prepare for independence
'Bridge to independence'	
2 Wendy 15yrs 8mo.	5-12 month placement to assist child with personal development towards independence.

7.3 MAINTAINING AND ENHANCING THE CHILD'S SIGNIFICANT RELATIONSHIPS

The model standards and focus of analysis

An important aim in the theoretical model of matching is the maintenance of regular and meaningful contact between child and the people important to him or her from whom he or she is separated in care. Such contact is positively associated with the effectiveness and stability of care placements. Having identified who the important people are, model matching practice would then seek to identify potential obstacles to the contact, make arrangements to nurture the positive relationships for the child and ideally, to improve the negative ones. This may require the active assistance of the carers as well as the professionals supporting the placement and the capacities of proposed carers should therefore be evaluated with this in mind. Placements that are likely to jeopardise the relationships in ways that cannot be overcome through planning and support should be avoided.

The question that follows from this standard for examination of the practice data is as follows:

- To what extent did the practitioners seek to sustain and nurture all the child's important relationships from the placement?

Findings on the practice

Figure 5. Practice topics relating to the child's important relationships and contact from the new placement

(red = core range, blue = common range, green = occasional range)

Topics recognised in practice	
User related Pattern of child's contact with own family from a prior placement. (8) Child's relationship with parent/s (8) Child's relationship with siblings (6) Child's peer relationships (5) Child's relationships with extended family (3) Child's relationship with absent father (3) Child's relationship with adult females outside the family(3) Child's relationship with teacher/s (3)	***Resource related*** Carers' style/regime of caring (4) Distance of resource from child's family home (3) ***Planning related*** Proposed contact between child and her family from prospective placement (7)

The propensity of the practice to focus on the child's current household when talking about the background to the referral was followed through in the talk about the child's contacts from the new placement. The pattern of the child's contact with her home from the current or a previous placement was referred to in all the sample discussions and this tended to lead directly to talk about future home contact arrangements, although in one discussion, future contact was not discussed at all. The child's relationships with adults in the extended family or outside the family were occasionally referred to (see the occasional user-related topics in figure 5) and seven of the discussions included some talk about her relationships with the opposite sex but there was no related talk about which, if any, of these relationships should be preserved and actively promoted from the new placement. Peer relationships were raised as a topic in five discussions but only in one were the child's friendships treated as something positive to be actively maintained.

The concept of contact, in the practice, was limited not only in the range of relationships considered but also in type. It tended to mean home visits to the virtual exclusion of any other form of contact such as telephone calls, letters, outings and visits to the placement. Of the six discussions that mentioned the child's relationships with siblings, three referred to past telephone contact but none developed any framework for future contact of this kind. There was no talk of letter writing, arranging outings for the child with her family or inviting the family to visit the placement on a regular basis.

The central contact issue for the practitioners appeared to be the regularity and manageability of home visits and whether the past pattern of these should continue. In assessing this, the importance of relationships to the child could be very understated. In discussion 3, for example, the social worker explained the increasing regularity of Wendy's visits to her mother in rather pejorative terms as "trying to wheedle herself back home". Despite reporting very close ties between Linda and her family in discussion 5, her social worker conjectured without apparent concern that once she

was placed, Linda "might realise that there is less going on for her at home and visit [home] less often".

There was also a strong tendency to view family contact as a potential threat to the placement rather than a benefit to the child. There was much talk of controlling or managing contact and a general undercurrent of defensiveness that had it s most explicit form in discussion 6. The chairperson asked, "is there anyone in the family liable to try and sabotage the placement? Are there plans for contact with Mum? Is Mum likely to wreak havoc?" The social worker replied that she did not foresee this possibility and a sequence followed in which it emerged that the child was feeling excluded from the family by her very hostile stepfather and a sense that her mother had chosen him over her. The practitioners agreed that this was not an unfair assessment by the child of her situation. Yet, when the topic of contact was returned to subsequently in the discussion, the child's feelings seemed to have been forgotten. As we see in the relevant extract quoted in figure 6 below, the practicalities focus solely on the manageability of home visits in the context of managing the placement. It is even suggested (in lines 1-7) that the frequency of home visits be reduced to allow the new placement to 'settle'.

Figure 6. Controlling family contact, from discussion 6

		Practitioners discuss Laura's habit of moving between her own mother's home and her grandparents' home when on home visits and feel this would be unacceptably complicated for the prospective carers.
1	PC:	I mean, maybe it's something that you can look at at the contract meeting ... giving
2		her a chance to settle in with the new family and then building up the contact with her
3		own family. Obviously you intend to allow her to have contact, and then building it up
4		again rather than maybe sort of keeping it (.)
5	PM:	I just sort of feel if you replicate what's already there just now with M- ((current
6		residential placement)) then you're going to run into trouble.
7	SW:	Yes, you could be on a hiding to nothing with that.
8	LW	I would think that the contact with family is very clearly - em
9	PC:	Set in the contract, mm ...
10	PM:	- whatever that is, I mean I wouldn't see any need for it to be any more than weekly. I
11		mean I think there's room for discussion as to whether it needs to be that frequent.
12	PC:	Yeh, mm hm.
13	SW:	It's also one of the reasons why -
14	LW:	And also time limited, if it's a Saturday afternoon, or a Saturday, you know, she goes
15		out ten till six really quite clear so that you know when she's late. And also where
16		she's going, is she going to Granny's or is she going to Mum or she going to spend
17		some time at both. I think there's a lot of, em, well it's much easier in a unit really to
18		duck and weave things like that because of the numbers they're dealing with and staff
19		changes. This is a family and people have to know what they're - she's only going to
20		be dealing with two adults and they're going to want to know when she's coming back
21		and where she's going.

Although the most blatant example of it, discussion 6 typified the common approach in the practice. Like the other discussions, it showed no evidence of practitioners making preservation of the child's relationships outside the placement a priority, far less seeking to use the placement to improve important relationships that were problematic for the child. Only in discussion 3, where the social worker had specified shared care between carers and the child's mother was there any sense of practitioners seeking to actively nurture family ties but even here, no arrangements were discussed to achieve this outcome. Planning generally in relation to contact seemed to be something that was customarily remitted to a later stage of the proceedings, for example the contract meeting as suggested by the chairperson in figure 6 above. By this time the child would already have been in the placement for at least three months.

Two resource-related topics have been included among the practice topics relevant to preserving the child's important relationships (second column of figure 5) but their connection to the issue was, in fact, very weak. The inconvenient distance of the proposed placement from the child's family home was referred to in three discussions but, beyond one short and inconclusive sequence about possible bus routes, there was no evident consideration being given to how any obstacles this might pose for contact between the child and her family could be overcome. The 'carers' style of caring' was a topic recognised by incidental references to resource properties of this kind in four of the eight discussions. It was not something that practitioners routinely informed or enquired about and there was only one instance where any connection was made between this and the child's contact arrangements. The import of the connection for the practitioners, however, appeared to lie in learning opportunities for the carers rather than potential problems or benefits for the child. The relevant sequence from the 'focus to the resource' phase in discussion 5 is shown in its entirety in figure 7 below. The social worker had proposed "contact unlimited, really" between the child and her immediate family. The liaison worker (LW) then turned to the prospective carers to check their reactions to the "high level of contact" that would be a new experience for them (line 1). The carers acknowledge this (lines 2-4) but the salient

point drawn out by the panel member (PM) in line 5 is that it represents something new for the carers to 'explore'.

Figure 7 from discussion 5. The child's family contact and the resource

1	LW	This is a high level of contact that I don't think we've really had.
2	SCf:	We've never really quite had that,
3	LW:	Apart from the emergency placement where the girl was going home, planned [ ].
4	SCm:	But that never happened
5	PM:	So it might be a new set-up for you with new things to explore and that.
6	SCf:	Well yes that's what it's all about. Yes I'm quite happy to do that.
7	LW:	Actually sounds much more healthy, that's the wrong word but a stronger
8		relationship than there than we've had with previous parents.
9	SCm:	Aye, that's right, because one parent we had in our kitchen all the time and it was
10		just trying to (.) maintain that contact.
11	LW:	Hmmm, that was his needs, very much so.

Having apparently welcomed the challenge (line 6), the carers are then drawn by their liaison worker into reflecting on a previous placement (lines 7-11) and the sequence ends with a change of topic. There is no discussion of how the carers can be helped to manage the level of contact expected for the child nor, indeed, any discussion of what the high level of contact will mean in practical terms.

7.4 THE CHILD'S CARE HISTORY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE PLACEMENT

The model standard and focus of analysis

Some discussion of the child's care history is included in the theoretical model of matching to complete the background context from which a referral for future placement has arisen. In the course of this, a check is made for two particular kinds of care experience that are known to threaten future placement stability. These are continuous care episodes of five years or more and multiple placement moves. Where either of these factors are present, it would be necessary to identify the kinds of support that would be available to the placement to help the child settle in it, to reduce the child's anxieties about it and to thereby reduce the risk of placement disruption.

The practice data were correspondingly analysed for evidence that the practitioners

- had accurate details of the child's care history available and,

- where the child had experienced long periods in care or multiple placement moves, measures to support the placement were discussed and agreed.

Findings on the practice

Figure 8. Practice topics relating to the child's care history and its implications for the future placement

(red = core range, blue = common range, green = occasional range)

Topics recognised in practice	
User related	***Planning related***
Child's behaviour in care (8).	Social worker's role in the care plan (4)
Placement moves (4).	
Past placements (3)	

The limited discussion of the background to the referral in the practice has been noted and this applied as much to the child's care history as to her family history. There was little about this in the background papers and the only core topic related to the child's car experience was her behaviour in care, which was referred to in various ways in all the sample discussions. Discussion around this topic generally arose in the 'focus on current placement' phase and tended to consist primarily of accounts of the child's behaviour in the current placement. There were three discussions in which references were made to previous placements but the social workers tended to be rather vague about the details of these (e.g. " ...and then, I think, she was with the Mc-s, for a while"; "She was in foster care, I think, when she was very young" ; "... and, em, they came up to Scotland after that, I think, but I'm not sure how long it was before the sister was referred , but she was in F- for about a month I think, and then shortly after, Carole went in...") and were not pressed for greater precision. In the course of the study's interviews with their social workers, four other children were discovered to have had prior care episodes but these were not referred to at all in their matching discussions. Provision of comprehensive and accurate care histories appeared not to be a priority in the practice.

As far as the study could establish from the practitioner interviews, none of the sample children had been continuously in care for longer than a year prior to their referral to the AFS. The length of the current care episode appeared, therefore, not to be an issue. Placement moves and breakdowns, on the other hand, was an issue for

the future placement. There were crosscutting issues that the practitioners were unable to resolve in the short term and they seemed disinclined to even consider postponing the proposed placement until the issues could be resolved.

The child concerned in one of the two discussions, discussion 1, had had several moves of placement during the nine months she had spent in care prior to her matching meeting. There was some discussion about the sequence and circumstances during the matching meeting and the chairperson had emphasised in his closing remarks the importance of sound and consistent support to the new placement to prevent further disruption to the child's care. However, the child's social worker was about to change her post and the case was to be re-allocated. Her senior had been invited to the meeting to discuss this but despite sustained efforts on the part of the matching panel, she felt unable to guarantee continuity of social work support. Faced with the options of delaying introductions to the placement until a social worker was allocated or proceeding with the placement without an allocated social worker, the practitioners opted for the latter. The only firm plan made to support the placement was to closely involve the carers' liaison worker and a residential worker to whom the child had become particularly attached in the process of placement introductions.

The second discussion, 4, concerned a child being matched to a new placement because her previous AFS placement had broken down. She too had had prior placement disruptions and the practitioners showed concern that she should not experience another. However, the crosscutting issue in this instance was probably even more intractable and might have argued against making the placement at all. The daughter in the proposed placement resource had become attached to another child who had been temporarily placed there in an emergency. The carers had asked their liaison worker if this child could remain with them instead of the child, Christine, to whom they had been officially linked. The panel chairperson met with the liaison worker and Christine's social worker prior to the matching meeting to discuss the issues and resolved that matching had to proceed on the basis that the resource would imminently be freed for Christine. This meeting was also observed for the study and

gave the impression that the decision to place had effectively been made before matching commenced. A considerable amount of the matching discussion centred on the emergency placement and the carer ultimately agreed to proceed with Christine's placement and to attempt to reconcile her daughter to it. The chairperson closed the meeting with the recommendation to place and the caution "but we've probably got more reservations about this than we would have in most situations". No measures had been agreed, however, to support what was anticipated to be a very vulnerable placement.

7.5 Child's individual needs and strengths and the related requirements of the placement

The model standards and focus of analysis

The theoretical model is an individualising model of matching. That is, it is concerned with what a *particular* child needs and whether a *particular* placement resource can provide it. This requires an appreciation of the child's particular personality, strengths, abilities, interests and aspirations as well as his or her problems. It requires also that the personalities, lifestyle and interests of the carer household are considered, that points of incompatibility are noted and that consideration is given to whether and how they might be resolved in the child's interests.

Particular attention needs to be paid to how the incoming child's needs and interests fit with those of other children in the carer household, in the short and the long term, to how clashes of personality of rivalry might be dealt with should they arise, and how the incoming child can be helped to adjust to the new family environment with its unfamiliar rules, routines and priorities.

The model standard of individualised decision making applies throughout the process of matching and the quality of the practice in relation to specific emotional and behavioural needs, education, and health and development will be discussed in later

behavioural needs, education, and health and development will be discussed in later sections. This section addresses the more general question of whether the data showed the practitioners to be:

- appreciating the child as a rounded individual with strengths and aspirations as well as problems and
- considering the particular properties of the prospective resource in relation to the individual child, particularly where there were other children in the prospective carer household, and
- considering the nature of placement supports that might enhance the compatibility between the child's requirements and the placement.

Findings on the practice

Figure 9. Practice topics relating to personal characteristics of the child and properties of the resource

(red = core range, blue = common range, green = occasional range)

User-related	*Resource related*
Child's personal attributes (8)	Impact of proposed placement on other children in the carer household (6)
Child'scare needs (8)	Composition of carer household (5)
Child' physical appearance (6)	Carers' style or regime of care (4)
Child's personal interests & aspirations (3)	Personalities of carer family members (3)
Attractions of resource for child (2)	Potentially positive impact child might have in carer family (2)

The sample texts contained a wealth of descriptive detail on the child from which it was clear that each discussion related to a very different individual. There were also certain topics, shown in figure 9 above, whose focus at first sight seemed to reflect a degree of individualisation in the decision making. Yet the uniqueness of each child seemed to slip away as their matching meeting progressed leaving very little in the closing summaries to distinguish one child from another. The findings suggested a number of reasons for this.

Firstly, there was an imbalance between the attention given to problematic aspects of the child and that given to her capacities and hopes. As we see in figure 9, all the discussions made some reference to the child's personal attributes. Only three, however, referred to her interests and aspirations and they were not taken very seriously even then. Reporting Wendy's aspiration to work with animals in discussion

you, these jobs are few and far between and she's going to be very limited about what she can do" and the discussion then turned to these limitations. Information in discussion 7 that Melissa aspired to "live in a nice house in a nice area" was greeted merely with amusement. There was no exploration of what may lie behind these desires or how she could be helped to realise them. Of the personal attributes referred to in the sample, few emerged unequivocally as personal strengths. They were rather saving graces in an otherwise problematic personality. Lesley (discussion 1) and Wendy (discussion 2), for example, were reported to have a pleasant and sociable side to their otherwise defiant manner and to be reasonable timekeepers despite their general waywardness. Christine (discussion 4) and Laura (discussion 5) were said to respond positively to praise, encouragement and affection on the basis of which practitioners expressed optimism that their troublesome behaviour could be ameliorated. The underlying presentation and interpretation of the sample children was, like that of their families, persistently problem-orientated. Melissa's discussion was perhaps an extreme example of this but clearly illustrates the general tendency. So unremittingly negative was the image of Melissa emerging in discussion 7 that the liaison worker was moved to ask whether the child had any redeeming qualities at all. His actual question in shown in line 1 of figure 10 below followed by an exchange between the social worker (SW) and the panel member (PM) in which perceived positive characteristics are first presented (lines 3-4) and then all but cancelled out by the negative connotations attached to them, lines (5, 7 and 10-13).

Figure 10. Discussing the child's attributes in discussion 7

1 2	LW:	I suppose in order for any family to survive Melissa there's going to have to be something likeable about her, did you see what the positives are about her?
3 4	SW:	There are likeable things about her, she's a good looking girl, she's very presentable girl, she's good hygiene, good dress sense, she is eh[
5	PM:	]And knows it.[
6 7 8	SW:	]And knows it. She has a high opinion of herself but that high opinion can sometimes be quite good. When Melissa wants to be pleasant she is an incredibly nice kid to have around. The only problem with Melissa is when you say no.
9	PM	But she's usually pleasant when she wants to wiggle something out of you?
10 11 12 13	SW:	Yes and although she now has reached (.) I mean, she'll do that with me. It's, you know, the eyelids flutter and she moves nearer and smiles at me and I'll just say 'Melissa, what is it you want?' and it's 'what do you mean?' (.) 'Well it's obvious by what you're doing that you're trying to get me to agree to something you think I won't'.

A second explanation for the low profile of the girls' uniqueness in the talk was the tendency for the practitioners to interpret their characteristics through the filter of a gendered stereotype of femininity. We see in figure 10 above that her well-turned out appearance is the first 'positive' characteristic that Melissa's social worker thought to mention and six of the eight discussions referred to the child's appearance as against the three that mentioned her interests and ambitions. Attention to personal appearance was clearly seen as a 'good' and appropriate quality for the girls to have where high self-esteem was apparently more problematic. Appearance had to fit within certain parameters, however. Laura's preference for jeans and her interest in football caused the panel chairperson in discussion 6 to worry whether she was confused about her sexuality. The social worker put her mind at rest with the response that Laura had become "more and more feminine looking as the months have gone on" and "yes, she's very much interested in boys." Other qualities selected for an approving mention by the practitioners also tended to fall within the passive, compliant stereotype. The descriptions of Laura (discussion 6) and Carole (discussion 8) were generally the least problem-oriented in the sample and reference was made particularly to their courtesy and co-operation with their social workers, carers, teachers and adults in general (eg. "she likes to be helpful and organised. When you go round there she makes you a cup of tea, and that."; "she's really pleasant to have around, no problem, no problem at all". The stereotyping reached its apogee in discussion 3 when the current carer opened her report on the current placement with a description of the apparently non-compliant Molly by paraphrasing the nursery rhyme about what little boys and girls are made of;

> "When she is good she's very, very good and when she's bad she's horrid. I mean, that's typically Molly. A very likeable young child and when I say 'young' I mean that. What you see and what you get are two entirely different things. You're presented with a very well groomed, make-up, hair all done, nice young lady. Emotionally she's much, much younger than her years. She finds it very difficult when adults are trying to explain that she'd done something wrong to actually stand and take that."

These problematised and stereotypical images of the referred children seem to colour the topic of the placement's impact on other children in the household which all the discussions addressed to some extent. By far the strongest theme in these sequences

was that of the difficulties the incoming child might create for the resident children. There was considerable concern in discussion 1 that Lesley might disrupt the orderly daily life of the carers' daughter in particular. Where Laura (6) and Melissa (7) were concerned, the problem was seen to be a possible inconvenience to the carers' sons, Laura because she might try to muscle in on their football games and Melissa's because she was deemed to be flirtatious. Figure 11 below illustrates the quality of discussion on the issue in Melissa's meeting. The proposed female carer (SCf) is discussing her concerns with the social worker (SW) and the exchange appears to centre on which of the boys is likely to be the target of Melissa's attentions.

Figure 11. Extract from discussion 7 concerning the impact of the placement on the carers' children

SCf:	The only thing you need to be more aware of, we notice recently, is our other son K- who's turning thirteen. He would have problems with managing that, sort of, sexually and that would be one of the areas to look for.
PM:	Yes, that was one of my questions on how you would/
SW:	/I couldn't give a guarantee on that bit I would certainly say that what we know of Melissa is she would go for an upper age. I mean a thirteen year old would be/
SCf:	He's very much a thirteen year old. He doesn't, he's not more mature.
SW:	Yes, if he was an eighteen year old with a care I would say you'd have a problem, or he might have a problem, but certainly thirteen, Melissa would not, I don't think would entertain that at all.

For Wendy (2) and Molly (3), the principal concern was whether their behaviour might negatively influence the children already fostered by their prospective carers. In none of the sample discussions was equivalent interest shown in the potential problems for the referred child in coming to terms with a set of established relationships or with a setting in which only she was unfamiliar with its rules and routines. Moreover, despite the emphasis on possible conflict the introduction of the referred child might provoke, there was remarkably little discussion of strategies to deal with it. Monitoring the relationships and, as the chairperson in discussion 6 put it, "crossing that bridge when you come to it" was as far as any suggested strategy went. The priority for the practice appeared to be the recognition of potential problems rather than their resolution.

A third tendency in the practice that appeared to suppress the individuality of the sample children was the lack of individuating detail on the resource and the rarity and

superficiality of the connections being made between the resource and the child concerned. (This observation will recur in various guises throughout the chapter). The only core topic concerning resource properties was that of the carers' experience of fostering (see the second column of figure 9), which occurred in six discussions. The practitioners did not so much examine this experience in relation to the referred child as note its general relevance for girls of their *type*. The resource in discussion 1, for example, was referred to by the liaison worker as "a strong family in relation to girls and in relation to control issues". The carers in discussion 7 were said to "have had a strong of adolescent girls" whom they had "handled quite well". There was no further development of these evaluations in either case. Referring to their own experience, carers also tended to speak in terms of categories of child and generalisations about their care needs. "Nine times out of ten", said the prospective carer in discussion 4, "we find its just down to rules for the kids. Being clear". In figure 11 below, we see a typical sequence in which the prospective carers (SCf and SCm) with some encouragement from a panel member (PM) are classifying the referred child in relation to the two girls previously place with them. Not having yet met the child, the carers were nevertheless confident that they had 'seen it all before'.

Figure 12. Comparing foster children, from discussion 6

SW:	Do you see any particular problems with Laura?
SCm:	Em (.) not really, no. We've seen it all before.
PM:	Well she sounds, actually, she sounds an easier girl than the one, ones you've had before.
SCf:	She seems a combination between like the two girls that we've had. Like one was, sort of, she was angry and showed it and one was, you know, very similar to Laura.

Beyond this broad-brush approach, little interest appeared to be shown in the qualities that differentiated one resource from another. Superficial features of the carers' lifestyles sometimes emerged in their own contributions to the discussion - one carer remarked that the child she was linked with seemed to be a lot tidier than she was, for example - but they were not pursued further. Discussion of the impact the referred child might have on other children in the household revealed some aspects of the other children's personalities and interests but again, partially and in the passing. The topic of the 'carers style or regime of caring' recognised in four of the discussions reflected not a sustained focus but a lose collection of utterances scattered through the texts which also offered glimpses into the personalities of the carer household. In

discussion 1, for example, the loquacious male carer spoke of the clear demarcation of roles between himself and his wife in which he provided the discipline and she the day to day care. He remarked jovially that "some of the girls are bit afraid of me at first" and that among his house rules was one in which "the only one to swear in the house is me". None of the other practitioners seemed inclined to examine the implications of his remarks or the to discuss their relevance to the needs of the child with whom the carers were being matched and this was a consistent finding wherever the personal qualities of the carer household emerged.

Overall, the carer families emerged as bland and one-dimensional. They were traditional nuclear families who fostered adolescents and, it appeared to be being assumed, were appropriate for almost any adolescent girl requiring a placement. Any other qualities they possessed were apparently not centrally relevant to the decision making and if there was one that might particularly suit the child to be placed this was fortunate but, it seemed, not essential. Certainly, no apparent attempt was being made by the practitioners to identify personal qualities in the carer households that might be important to or yet conflict with the child's placement requirements.

Tendencies in the practice to problematise and stereotype the referred children and to take the qualities of the resource for granted conspired to obscure the unique characteristics of both. A further factor compounding this was the tendency to dwell on the child's general neediness rather than specify the particular needs that placement was intended to meet in the short and longer term. Talk in the practice about needs was actually very difficult to pin down for it was rarely clear in the actual utterances of the participants that it was the child's needs, as opposed to her experiences, personality, or general behaviour, that speakers were treating as the salient issue. Moreover, when individual needs were made explicit they tended to be expressed so hesitantly and speculatively that it was not clear whether the placement was expected to meet them or not and they were seldom translated into specific objectives, tasks or strategies. An example of this is provided by discussion 8 in which the social worker expressed her view that Carole might have unresolved issues about her early childhood in the care of her father. Responding, a panel member conjectured that,

"hopefully if she's in a family where people are going to be listening and aware of how she's feeling and that sort of thing ((i.e. her refusal to talk about her past)) could get picked up".

Was this a requirement that the carers needed to be vigilant and prepared for disclosures of some kind? Was it to be they or the social worker who provided the listening ear or followed up the disclosures? The questions were neither asked nor answered in the discussion itself.

By contrast, the practitioners were very confident and certain that the sample children needed 'a family' and a 'family experience' that only foster care could provide. By inference and implication if not made explicit, the foster family was expected to provide all that the child's own family had not and all that a residential placement could not. An idealised vision of the foster family seemed to permeate the entire sample of discussions. It was a normal family and yet also exemplary. It functioned as a family should, even with a stranger in its midst. It was warm, harmonious, adaptive and infinitely healing while also able to discipline and even ameliorate challenging behavioural problems. With a brief selection of statements made by various participants across the sample, figure 13 below conveys a sense of the ubiquity of the foster family ideal and illustrates some of the ways in which it was related to the sample children.

Figure 13. Assertions about the need for and benefits of the family placement
PSW = Social worker; PM = panel member; CC = current carer; LW = liaison worker.

1. Lesley	SW:	She's not well placement in a children's unit, that's absolutely certain. She needs a family. My feeling is she needs a lot of affection, that's why she gets into all this acting up stuff with her peer group. What she really needs is a bit of mothering.
2. Wendy	PM:	I think it will be a good experience for her. I think it is particularly good in terms of the way that you ((i.e. the proposed carers)) seem to operate as a couple. That's quite significant and I think she'll get a good deal from that.
3. Molly	CC:	... if she can get a very caring family I think she will do extremely well. I don't think that behaviour will happen there. "
4. Christine	LW:	I would say from what I've seen of Christine with the G-s ((current placement)) she's responded very well to being in a family... Yes, she will be difficult in a family placement but in a residential setting I think it would be positively harmful for her.
5. Linda	SW:	I think it would be so helpful for Linda to live an ordinary, normal family life, just to experience what it is like,
6. Laura	PM:	Laura really needs some security and stability in her life, she needs ordinary family routines, affection ..."

7. Melissa	SCm:	I think she basically needs the experience of a family. She doesn't seem to have much idea of a family but she obviously needs it.
8. Carole	PC:	"I think Carol's crying out for a family that would provide her with some consistency, stability, that doesn't play games ... We have got to make sure that she has as good a quality of life in a family as possible and try and show her that it is possible to have a good family life. That it could be fun and gradually she might open up as she gains more trust obviously with people.

In the light of the generic remedy that foster care appeared tacitly to be held to be in the practice, specificity about individual placement requirements and strategies for ensuring that they were met may have felt superfluous. Whether or not this was the explanation, lack of attention to such details was characteristic of the practice as we shall see in the findings relating to the child's behavioural, emotional, education, health and developmental requirements which are discussed next.

7.6 Addressing specific behavioural and emotional problems

The model standard and focus of analysis

Not all teenagers requiring a foster placement will have behavioural or emotional problems that require special treatment and in a fostering scheme specialising in placements for this age group it would be reasonable to expect that the resources of the scheme would be able to cope with the normal stresses and strains of daily living with adolescents. However, placement requirements in some instances may include an expectation that specific behavioural or emotional problems will be ameliorated in the course of the placement. The theoretical model therefore provides for examination of the nature and possible causes of such problems so that consideration can be given to appropriate strategies to be employed in the placement, the capacities of the resource to follow these strategies and the supports that would be required to enable the placement to achieve its treatment goals.

The data were examined accordingly for evidence that the practitioners were establishing the nature and causes of specific behavioural or emotional problems in the child and agreeing appropriate measures to address them.

Figure 14. Practice topics related to the child's emotions and behaviour

(red = core range, blue = common range, green = occasional range)

User-related	*Resource-related*
Child's behaviour at home (8).	Carer experience of fostering (6)
Child's behaviour in care (8).	Carers' experience of/ ability to manage children's challenging behaviour (4)
Child's general demeanour (8)	Carers' capacity to meet referred child's emotional needs (2)
Child's behaviour in school (7).	
Child's emotions (7)	
Child's sexuality (7)	
Management of child's behaviour in current placement (7)	*Planning-related*
Potential for problematic behaviour in prospective placement (6)	Future management of child's behaviour (8).
Need for clear limits (6)	Placement tasks (4)
Child's behaviour in the community (2)	Social worker's role in care plas (4)
	Role of other agencies in care plan (4).
	Liaison worker's role in care plan (2).

Talk about the child's behaviour in various contexts and situations was a very prominent topic in the sample of discussions as a whole. As we see in figure 15, there were several core topics related to the child's behaviour, its potential to be problematic in the prospective placement, and its past and future management. The topics were not always substantial. In discussions 5 and 8 they amounted to little more than briefly checking whether the child's behaviour had been or was likely to be an issue and it apparently was not. In a further three cases, the child's behaviour was discussed more extensively and at times the practitioners could be clearly seen to be assessing whether it was merely typical teenage conduct or indicative of something more problematic. As illustration, the extract in figure 15 shows the panel chairperson of discussion 2 (PC) asking the child's current carer (CC) for a view on the subject. The practitioners had been listening to the current carer describing Wendy's behaviour in the placement and how the carer had dealt with her poor time keeping by grounding her for one night.

Figure 15. Establishing whether behaviour within normal adolescent range or exceptional

ii) from Discussion 2

PC:	That sounds in many ways par for the course for kids in care. Do you see her as just being like you would expect a 15 year old to be, or do you see any of that as being a bit more than that?
CC:	No really. She's just a normal wee lassie. I mean, this manipulating thing and, as I say, this time thing. This is the last thing that's been happening and I thought, right, we'll stop that as well and last night I thought right this is it, young lady, you know. ((The carer grounded Wendy but she can accept it and she doesn't cause a big fuss. She really loves to get out but she took that last night no bother.

Apparently Wendy's co-operation with rules had improved over time and the practitioners went on to conclude that, although she could still be challenging, her behaviour was manageable provided clear limits were set by the carers and the application of sanctions was consistent. Similar conclusions were reached in discussions 3 and 6.

Later in the same discussion, but more briefly, the practitioners discussed the significance of Wendy's "moods swings" and similarly decided that they were "normal for a fifteen year old" rather than indicating deep seated emotional problems. There was generally less discussion about the children's emotional ups and downs and this is reflected in the small number of related topics shown in figure 14. Questions were asked about how the child felt about this or that and statements were made about her emotions (e.g. "she feels her mother has chosen her stepfather over her"; "she is an angry child a lot of the time"; that ((not knowing her father)) is a big issue for her") but it was not an area that the practitioner tended to pursue below the level of description. The strong impression in the data was that the point of talking about behaviour was not to establish its causes, the feelings that underlay it or how the child might be helped to find more acceptable ways of relating to other people. There was a lot of talk about limit setting and several references to the sample about 'managing' the child but little about the nature of the limits and even less about what the management should entail. Rather, the intent behind the talk appeared to be to get the measure of the demands in terms of control that the behaviour might make on the carers.

The impression was reinforced when resource-related topics were examined. (See second column of figure 14). The carers' experience of fostering was conveyed largely through brief sketches of former placements that were also summarised in the background papers. From this, as we saw in section 7.5, generic abilities were inferred in relation to categories of child. When their ability to manage difficult behaviour emerged as a topic, and it did briefly in only four of the discussions, this too tended to give only the most general indication of how they might approach the behaviour of the child being matched, (e.g. "I would sit down and discuss it, maybe not right away, but I

behaviour emerged as a topic, and it did briefly in only four of the discussions, this too tended to give only the most general indication of how they might approach the behaviour of the child being matched, (e.g. "I would sit down and discuss it, maybe not right away, but I would talk about it with her and see what we could do about it."). The capacity of carers to meet the child's emotional needs was raised as a topic in only two discussions and in one of these, it took the form of a question from the chairperson as to whether they felt they could "take on" the role of helping her to talk about her feelings which never received an answer. The general inexperience of the carers in discussions 6 and 8 for whom it was their first planned foster placement was not raised for discussion at all.

There were three discussions in the sample, 1,4 and 7, from which treatment objectives were analytically inferred because they dwelt on behavioural problems that the practitioners seemed to expect the placement to ameliorate in some way. These might have been expected to show a more sophisticated approach to behavioural and emotional issues. Yet, the attention given to appropriate therapeutic strategies and the carers' ability to carry them out appeared to be no different in these discussions than in those where the child's behaviour was of less concern.

Lesley's behaviour worried the practitioners in discussion 1 to the extent the liaison worker described it as "whirling out of control". In this discussion, there was more exploration than most of the circumstances and causes of the child's behavioural and emotional problems but no more evidence of progression from it to possible remedies. The proposed carers were complemented on their competence at managing difficult behaviour and from this their ability to approach Lesley's behaviour in an appropriate way was assumed. The placement with which discussion 4 was concerned was also deemed to be very risky because the child was moving from a placement that had broken down and her temper tantrums could be hard to manage. In addition, there was a suspicion that she had been sexually abused when very young. The carers' previous experience with a sexually abused child was noted in the passing and there was an inconclusive exchange about the possibility of reactivating

the child's contact with a specialist counsellor. Twice during discussion a panel member suggested seeking the assistance of a psychologist to help make the placement more robust but none of these possibilities was taken further. In his closing summary, the chairperson simply referred to the need for the carers to exercise "firm controls" when Christine's behaviour became difficult. It was anticipated that Melissa (discussion 7) would have difficulty accepting the authority of her carers. She had been admitted to care following a suicide attempt but this was not discussed at all. In responding to the invitation to comment on what they had heard about the child, the carers briefly explained a little of their general approach to behaviour management in these terms, "Our own children are ruled in the house with the other kids ((i.e. foster children)) as well. Everyone has their say. It's discussed, things like that. No one single about. And there is a rule. You do one thing and the punishment's the same" and expressed general confidence in their ability to manage the placement. This appeared to satisfy the other practitioners for there was no further discussion about how Melissa's problems might best be addressed.

Constructively working with a child's behavioural and emotional problems might be considered one of the more complex tasks that specialist foster carers are expected to take on. There was little evidence in the data, however, that it was given this status in the practice.

7.7 Promoting the child's educational continuity and attainment

The model standard and focus of analysis

Careful consideration to arrangements for the child's future education is a very important aspect of matching in the theoretical model. The aim of decision making in relation to it is to limit educational disruption, to ensure that any educational deficits will be attended to and to ensure that the child's educational progress is supported and encouraged. Ideally, the location of a proposed placement should not itself require the child to change school but if this was absolutely unavoidable, then great care must be taken to minimise the disruption to the child.

Findings on the practice

Topics relating to the child's education were raised in all but one of the discussion and these are displayed in figure 16 below.

Figure 16. Practice topics relating to the child's education

(Red = core range, blue = common range, green = occasional range)

User related	*Resource-related*
Child's past pattern of school attendance. (7)	Distance of resource from child's school.(6)
Child's behaviour in school (7)	
Child's educational attainment (4).	*Planning related*
Involvement of educational psychologist. (4)	Future school placement.(6)
Child's relationship with teachers (3)	
Future educational needs/opportunities. (2)	

The fact that the subject of the child's education was touched on so consistently across the sample suggests that it was something the practitioners were routinely mindful of when matching placements. However, the focus of discussion was very narrow.

We see in figure 16 that the incidence of the topics across the sample was very variable and in itself reveals some of the practice priorities. The topics of school attendance and behaviour in the past were routinely raised. As with other aspects of the child's behaviour, this typically appeared to be for the purpose of establishing whether or not the child's behaviour was likely to present difficulties in the future. Educational attainment and the involvement of an educational psychologist, on the other hand, were topics raised in only half the sample and in two of these they were merely faint references, (e.g. PC: "School?" CC: "School doesn't appear to be a problem for Carole. She seems to be getting on OK"; PM: "Has there been a referral to the Educational Psychologist?"; SW: "No.") . Generally, little interest appeared to be being shown by the practitioners in the child's educational ability, attainment or whether school absences and placement changes had caused her to fall behind the standard of her peers.

Discussions 2 and 6 were quite exceptional in that they considered not only the child's educational deficits but also a means to rectify them. Wendy (discussion 2) was due to

leave school in a few months with a level of literacy that had left her unable to read or complete a job application form. The practitioners discussed how the deficit might be remedied, perhaps by her attendance at a further education course from her new placement. Nothing was resolved about this but it was at least discussed. Laura in discussion 6 had been persuaded to repeat a school year so that she could make the best of her academic abilities. The location of her proposed placement would require a change of school which, fortuitously, the practitioners saw as a distinct advantage for her. "If she started afresh somewhere else," her social worker observed, "people wouldn't know she's gone back a year" and this would save her embarrassment with her friends. Moreover, the panel chairperson remarked, the school local to the proposed placement had "a good reputation for working with difficult kids and a good Guidance department". However, where placement distance from the child's current school was an issue in other meetings, a different approach was taken.

The practitioners consistently checked the distance between the proposed placement and the child's normal school and it emerged as an issue in three of the discussions. Lesley (discussion 1), Linda (discussion 5) and Melissa (discussion 7), who had all experienced significant gaps in their education, were said to prefer to remain at their current school and it was acknowledged that there would have been some advantages to them in doing so. Lesley's social worker commented that the school had been the only stable thing in Lesley's life in recent months, for example, and Linda's social worker said that her school had been very supportive of her. She had received a "smashing report" which "said positive things about all her behaviour, it was always good", and that with consistent attendance, she would be able to improve on her poor grades. Nevertheless, it was resolved in Lesley's case that the change of school contingent on her proposed placement would simply have to be accepted and that for Linda to remain at her current school would be, in the words of her social worker "good but not essential". In Melissa's case, it was predicted that she would find the journey to school from the new placement impossible to sustain and would seek to change school of her own volition. This would be "all to the good", according to one panel member in her closing summary, because the carers would find it easier to communicate with a local

school "so I would really not mind at all if she left of her own accord and yes, I would be in favour of the match."

Thus, while there was some instances in the practice where it came close to meeting the model standards, in general, priority was not given to continuity and development in the child's education, educational deficits and needs were not consistently identified and addressed, and rather than looking to strengthening a placement in the interests of the child's education, educational arrangements tended to be contingent upon the location of the placement.

7.8 Promoting the child's health and personal development

The model standard and focus of analysis

The model includes discussion of the child's health to ensure that arrangements for general health care are put in place alongside the placement and that any specific health needs are understood and met. In addition, the model addresses issues of the child's personal development, such low self-esteem or lack of social skills, to ensure that the placement will address these sensitively and productively.

Following this standard, the data were examined for evidence of attention being given by the practitioners to the child's health care and development needs and the manner in which these were to be met for the duration of the placement.

Figure 17. Practice topics relating to the child's personal and social development
(red = core range, blue = common range, green = occasional range)

User related	***Resource-related***
Child's sexuality (7)	None
Child's relations with the opposite sex (7)	***Planning related***
Child's self care and well-being (5)	Placement tasks (4)
Child's peer relationships (5)	
Specific developmental needs (3)	
Child's social activities (3)	

Talk about the child's health and personal development had a very low profile in the data. As we see in figure 17, only seven topics were raised in discussion that appeared to have a bearing on these aspects of the placement. The child's sexuality and her relations with the opposite sex were the only core topic but, as we shall see, the child's health and personal social development were not unambiguously the principle concern when these was discussed.

Five discussions made reference to issues of self-care and personal well being in the form of brief questions and answers about the child's hygiene, eating and sleeping habits and health was included with these in two discussions, (e.g. "Are there any hygiene, health, eating habits, anything about Molly like that?). More serious and sustained attention was given to the child's physical and mental well being in discussion 6 in which questions were asked and answered about the child's terminated pregnancy and plans for contraception. With the exception of these three instances, the child's health was not mentioned and arrangements for routine health care were not discussed anywhere in the sample.

Attention to the child's personal social development was only marginally more evident in the data. Five discussions referred to peer relationships and three to the child's social activities but the subjects rarely progressed beyond brief statements of fact or observations. In discussion 2, for example, the social worker suggested that Wendy's "high turnover of friendships" indicated an "inability to make attachments". This assessment did not lead to proposals for strategies that might help Wendy overcome this perceived difficulty. Attention turned instead to the problems for the prospective

carers if Wendy spent too much time with her friends and treated their home as "lodgings". The subject was treated rather more purposefully in Carole's discussion (8) where her friendships and youth club were spoken of as important contributions to her developing emotional maturity and social skills. There were only two other references to specific developmental needs in the data, neither of which were translated into objectives or tasks for the placement. The social worker in discussion 3 asserted that one of Molly's needs was to be helped to see that her future was not pre-destined to follow the same course as her mother's life. The role of the placement in this process was not articulated but then, it was intended to last only a few months and this was clearly a longer term objective. In her closing summary to discussion 7, a panel member concluded that fourteen and a half-year old Melissa "needs to be helped to become a child again, to have the burden of decisions taken off her". No guidance followed on how the carers might achieve this with a child whom the practitioners had earlier decided was likely to challenge every attempt they made to assert their authority.

Only one of the discussions did not refer in any way to the child's sexuality and relations with the opposite sex. These were clearly areas of concern, not to say anxiety, for the practitioners but it was not always clear in the talk what the concerns and anxieties related to precisely. The background papers included a question to be answered by the current carers on the child's stage of sexual development (see Appendix D) and assessing this may have been the intent behind some of the questions put about the child's relations and behaviour with the opposite sex, (e.g. "Is she interested in boys?"; Is she the same with male and female staff or does she respond differently?"). As the same time, concern for the prospective carers was at least equally apparent. A sequence about Melissa's perceived coquetry in discussion 7 concluded with a panel member's observation, "that sort of thing can be difficult for carers to take".

Direct questions as to whether or not the child was sexually active were put by various participants in five of the discussions. In only two did the practitioners then focus on the possible need for the child to protect herself if she was or became sexually involved. In only one was the interest translated into a task for the

sexually involved. In only one was the interest translated into a task for the placement; namely, that the carers provide the child with guidance in sexual relationships and contraception. In the other discussions, the talk moved on to other topics without any indication of the implications being drawn from the information imparted. Carole's discussion (8), the chairperson concluded that her sexuality was "not a big issue" but went on to add, somewhat ominously, that "her relationship to male figures, although not obvious with J- ((current carer)), it's a biggy in there that we haven't really been able to get a hold of". He said nothing further to clarify what he meant by this; it had not been a major subject of earlier discussion. The sense from the data was that the practitioners may not have been certain themselves why and in what ways was the child's sexuality was an issue for placement. If they were clear in their own minds about why the issue was relevant, they certainly did not seem to be clear on what they should do about it when making placements.

The child's health was patently not a priority for the practice but it is possible that the practitioners were thinking generally, but privately, about the impact of the proposed placement on the child's personal social development. However, they did not explicitly share these thoughts, debate them, or develop them to the point of clear goals and strategies for the placement. The expectations of the placement in terms of the child's health and development were therefore vague and possibly conflicting.

7.9 VIEWS OF THE PARTIES TO THE PLACEMENT

The model standard and focus of analysis

Taking account of the views of all parties to a prospective placement and carefully considering the implications of over-riding them was found in the literature to be positively associated with good placement outcomes. The theoretical model therefore gives an important place to establishing the views and preferences of the child, the parents, the carers and any others closely involved in making and supporting the placement. Areas of doubt should be fully discussed and ideally resolved before a placement is made lest they surface later to the placement's detriment. If there are

serious issues arising from one of the party's reluctance or resistance towards a placement, then it might be necessary to reconsider making the placement at all.

The data were examined for evidence of the relevant views and preferences being taken into account. The process of matching and its preceding stages attended automatically to the views of the social worker and, as we have seen, whole phases of discussion were concerned with the carers' views. In view of this, the focus of analysis at this stage concentrated on the views of the parents and the child.

Findings on the practice

Figure 18. Practice topics relating to the views and preferences of the parties to the placement. (red = core range, blue = common range, green = occasional range)

User-related	***Resource-related***
Child's views and preferences about placement (7) Parent or parent's views of care plan or placement (5) Appeal of carer family for child (2)	Carers' views on the proposed placement (8) ***Planning-related*** **None**

It will be recalled (Chapter 5) that neither the child nor her parents took part in the matching process and it was agency policy to inform the family only of the location of a proposed AFS placement and the composition of the carer household. The information the child and parents had on which to base questions they may wish to ask or views they may wish to contribute to the decision about the proposed placement was therefore extremely limited. Moreover, they could do so only indirectly through their social worker.

Nevertheless, it was clearly not axiomatic in the practice that the child and parents' views would be taken into account in the decision making for in one meeting the child's views were not enquired into at all and the parents' views were simply reported in the context of their historical conflict with the agency. As we see in figure 18 above, reference was made to the child's views and preferences about the placement in seven of the eight sample discussions and to the parents views in five them. No planning-related topics were recognised as relating to the views and preferences .

Discussion on the perspectives of the family was nowhere substantial and paled into insignificance against the attention given to the those of the carers. It was also of a quality as to suggest that the family's perspective was little consequence in the practice.

Most commonly, questions arose about the child's reaction to the prospect of a planned foster placement (e.g. "what did she say when you told her about the (matching) meeting?"), about its location (e.g. What about the geography? She says in her form that she wants to stay in town."), and about her preference for sharing a bedroom or having one of her own. All these questions had already been answered in the background papers that the child had completed herself. There were few references to these papers and some confusion when they were referred to. Carole (8), for example, had written in answer to the question, 'What kind of family would you like?' that she wanted a "a fairly strict family". The practitioners speculated on the meaning of this but not even her social worker could explain its significance. It seemed that as a substitute for the child being present to answer the questions herself, the papers were rather inadequate.

Two showed of the discussions showed evidence that there were issues for the children in contemplating a placement about which they had been told so little. The social worker reported in discussion 7 on his unproductive attempts to discuss the prospect of a placement with Melissa; "When I last saw her, a week last Monday, she refused to think about (the proposed placement) because she couldn't think about these sorts of things until she saw the people and so how could she discuss it." This speaker had a habit of shifting between direct and wry reported speech when communicating the gist of what the child had said to him, but it was clear in the context that it was the child who felt unable to form a view on something she knew nothing concrete about. In discussion 2, the child was reported to be showing great curiosity about the placement being considered for her yet the news was greeted only with apparent amusement. Figure 19 below shows the relevant sequence and is annotated in italics to show the associated non-verbal behaviour of the participants.

Figure 19. News of the child's curiosity about the placement in discussion 2

Panel member	Does she know about the B-s ((proposed carers))?
Social worker	I haven't told her all about ((the carers)) but I have said that we are looking at a placement in ((small town)). She's desperate to find out more about it, 'have they got a dog, have they got lots of money?'.
	Gentle laughter in group
Current carer	I've got lots of questions from Wendy to ask D- ((i.e. the proposed carer)), all her rules and regulations!
	More laughter in group
	Change of topic with exchange between current and prospective care on their respective domestic routines.

There were occasions when practitioners seemed to be reading more into the child's expressed views that she may perhaps have intended. In Linda's discussion (6), the only issue on which her views were consulted was that of changing schools and repeating a year. Her social worker responded to the question that Linda "appeared to be quite keen", whereupon the discussion proceeded as if she had been expressing satisfaction with the placement as a whole; "it helps that she's positive about the placement", a panel member concluded. Whether this was the result of wishful thinking or merely inattentiveness to what the child had actually said and meant was not clear.

The children in discussions 1 and 3 were reported to be unhappy about the prospect of a new placement. The social worker in discussion 1 explained that the proposed placement represented another attempt by the agency to keep her from her family and Molly's current carer gave a heartrending account of Molly's in discussion 3. Molly had apparently left the review at which the news of her imminent matching meeting was given in abject silence only to "break down" later. The current carer explained that it had taken "two and a half hours" to comfort her during which time she repeatedly cried out "I just want to go home to my Mum, I just want to go home". While the practitioners responded sympathetically to this information it did not appear in itself to hold any sway in the decision making. It was seen to make the placement vulnerable but not impossible and in both cases the emphasis was placed on the need to support the children very carefully through the introductions.

If the children's views were countenanced but of negligible influence in the decision making, the parents views appeared to be irrelevant in all but one respect; to ascertain

that they would not actively interfere with the agency's plans for the child. Only in Molly's discussion (3), where the intention was that her care be shared between the carers and her mother, was an active role for the parent in the placement explicitly countenanced. In the other discussions, the parents were portrayed as excluding themselves because they felt threatened by the placement, because they were at the time angry with their child or because they were simply uninterested. The two extracts in figure 21 below provide succinct illustrations of what was a typically low-key approach taken to the perspective of the parents in the discussions.

Figure 21. Discussing parental attitudes to the proposed placement

i) from discussion 2

PM;	Going back to Mum again, where do you see Mum in terms of the (AFS) placement team, planning type of meetings and that?
PSW:	I think Mum does it out of a sense of duty. I think, you know, well, she's not going to care for Wendy any longer but she will attend these things if she has to. It's like that, you know, and she's no problem Mum to deal with really is she? She's no problem.
PM:	At least if she does come along, she'll know what's happening and we'll know she knows what's happening.

ii) from discussion 5

PM:	How does Mum feel about the placement, will she support the placement?
PSW:	Well, she'll not oppose it, let's put it that way...

The stance of the practice in relation to the child's parents appeared to be that they should be kept informed but not expected, far less encouraged, to take an active part in the process of placement making.

7.10 Summary of decisions made and contingency planning

The model standard and focus of analysis

In the theoretical model, the end of a matching meeting is as important as any other part. It is here that the main points of the preceding discussion are summarised, the merits of the resource are finally weighed and the terms and objectives of an agreed placement reiterated. It is also the point at which a contingency plan is agreed to protect the child should the placement fail. The object is to ensure that the placement decision is soundly based on the child's needs and interests and that all involved in the placement are clear about its goals and content.

The analysis of the form and function of the final phase of discussion found that it concluded on the issue of whether the placement should proceed but little else. In contrast to the model, the settling of terms and the resolution of predicted placement problems appeared not to be its principal object. A question remains therefore as to where and how these details were to be settled. With a closer examination of the content and style of the summaries that largely comprised these 'closing formalities', the study addressed this question together with two others; how was the potential for placement failure countenanced and what did the summaries indicate the main thrust of the discussions to have been directed towards?

Findings on the practice

No particular range of topics was found to be associated with the closing formalities of the practice and the extent to which the practitioners summaries referred back to earlier discussion varied enormously. Those in discussion 1 and 2, for instance, were relatively long, touched on some of the issues covered and even raised new ones. By contrast, discussions 4 and 5 concluded with simple statements endorsing the placement and discussion 6 dispensed with all but a brief summary from the chairperson.

Despite the variation in style, there were two very evident currents running through the closing sequences of the discussions that provided insight into the purpose to which the practice appeared to be primarily directed.

The most striking of these was their tone of optimism and hope. The source of the optimism appeared to lie in pure faith in a resource which, as we have seen, had barely been discussed at all. Even where fears were expressed about the child's co-operation with the intervention or the placement surviving other risks identified in respect of it, the practitioners seemed determined to view its prospect positively. Discussions 5, 6 and 8 concluded in an atmosphere of unreserved optimism. Described as "a very useful matching" by the chairperson in discussion 5, the virtues of Linda's prospective

placement seen in its capacity to provide her with good role models in the carers themselves and in the family life they provided. In Carole's discussion (8), the practitioners saw the value of the placement more in its capacity to make her feel "safe and valued for herself", as one of the panel members put it. The participants in discussion 6 were simply despatched with well wishes from the chairperson for what he regarded as a "good placement". In these discussions the prospect of placement failure was simply not countenanced at all.

The practitioners in other discussions were more circumspect but nevertheless without apparent doubt that the placement would benefit the child. The principal obstacle as they saw it was the child herself. The placement represented a chance of which she might be unwilling or unable to take advantage. Figure 21 below illustrates this finding with extracts from three different discussions. The first extract is taken from discussion 1 where the child's behaviour and general emotional instability was seen as the major risk to the placement. The second extract relates to a child who had declared her intention to stay in the placement only until she could legally discharge herself from care. Melissa in the third extract was perceived as a very wilful child who was unlikely to compromise if the placement was not to her liking. As we see, responsibility for allowing the placement to succeed, and by implication, for allowing it to fail, is placed squarely on each of the children. No discussion took placement about protecting the child in the event that the placement did fail.

Figure 21 . The child as the obstacle to a successful placement

i) from discussion 1

LW	I think we know there are risks in this placement, high risks, but I think it's as basic as somebody deserving a chance here. It's about giving a chance to the girl. We have an strong family who are very good with girls and control issues but we really don't quite know how she's gonna react ... but what we do know is, given her background, this is a girl who is gonna struggle with relationships and it's going to be a lot of work.

ii) from discussion 2

PC:	There's a chance for Wendy here. She is quite capable of being whatever she needs to be to try and get what she wants so maybe she'll think the same about the placement.

iii) from discussion 7

PM	Well, we had some reservations regarding how Melissa would take to it. I do feel she has such strong views, but if we can get past that, if she accepts the placement then I'm in favour of the match. If Melissa doesn't accept the placement , I think it would be a much worse situation for her. She may just see that.

The second current in the final sequences of the discussions could be called, for want of a more elegant term, non-closure. That is, the discussion ended but the debate and the decision remained open. The individual summaries tended to be firm that the placement would be good for the child and should proceed therefore, but they were hesitant in most other respects. The child 'may' respond well, the placement 'might' encourage her to talk about her feelings, the change of school 'could possibly' turn out for the best. The final summaries by the seven chairpeople who made them were characteristically vague about what had been discussed, what it signified for the placement decision and what it signified for the placement. The impression was that the only issue of any certain import for the practitioners was that the placement had been agreed. Figure 22 illustrates this with the final utterance of discussion 2 in full. In this we see the chairperson (PC) using the phrases "the kind of things we've identified" (line 4), "stuff in there" (line 15), and "managing the ending of something" (line 19) as shorthand alternatives to specifying precisely what he is referring to. He clearly assumes others will either understand what this is or it is not critically important that they do.

Figure 22. The chairperson's summary in discussion 2

1	PC	Aye. Certainly I mean from my point of view most of what's been said, a number of things
2		that we've identified today, I mean I think that's what we've done is identify them rather than
3		resolve them. That in fact we've left some things sitting with - an imbalance that has to be
4		picked up in placement about the management of the kind of things we've identified and the
5		fact that the way that Wendy operates doesn't necessarily fit our idea of how it might be
6		managed so I mean there's a bit there about how that's picked up. Again it's about the
7		balance for me between the department's responsibility there and what we expect the carers
8		to do and you negotiate that away yourselves. In terms of the placement going ahead I mean
9		thinking of Wendy when we were first presented with her some weeks back, this seems much
10		more likely as a go ahead placement than it would then. We'd much more in terms of
11		reservations about any kind of placement and now we're sitting much more comfortably
12		around the table thinking about a placement and that's quite surprising and I would go along
13		with that, however, I have to remind myself that not that many weeks ago we had a lot
14		reservations which can't have gone away, they must be around there somewhere so there's
15		still stuff there to work with which we're going to have to take a lot of care and from Jeanette's
16		saying Wendy is quite capable of being whatever she needs to be to try and get what she
17		wants so maybe think the same about the placement. And I think what B-b's saying also I
18		agree with, when she leaves school we're into yet another kind of placement and the next wee
19		period I think is about managing the ending of something and building upon the possible
20		beginnings of something else and we'll see where that goes. Can I then say officially that we
21		consider the match to be one we go ahead with and move ahead to introductions and see
22		where that goes and those who are going to arrange the introductions can retire and go
23		ahead and do that.

The speaker in figure 22 closes (lines 20-22) with an inference that the decision to proceed with the placement may have been made but the process of determining its suitability ("the match") goes on. A similar formulation occurred in discussions 4 where the chairperson expressed the decision as "to look further at the matching. I think we need to go on to introductions". There were references at the end of other discussions to placement arrangements that it would be "jumping ahead quite a bit too far" to make at this stage and the issue of family contact for the child that could be "looked at the contract meeting". All but the decision to place appeared to be being postponed.

Looking back again to figure 22, the chairperson speaks of identifying but not resolving things (lines 1-6). He enjoins those directly responsible for the placement to "negotiate that away yourselves" (lines 6-8) and, finally, of moving ahead to introductions "and seeing where that goes" (lines 21-22). From the practitioners' point of view, it seemed, the function of the practice did not extend to agreeing terms and plans for the placement. Rather, it was simply to allow them to look over prospective placements, to air any thoughts and issues that, according to the 'rule of spontaneity', they felt prompted to raise at any point, and to defer resolution of these to others or, possibly, to whatever course the placement fatefully followed. In her faltering style, the chairperson of discussion 5 explained to the prospective carers at her meeting thus;

> "I suppose part of the process here is partly to maybe trying to look at things that might happen or that because sometimes if there are too many of them there might be (.) because that's what we're here to look at, are there enough good things, are there enough things that we think, cos none of us can know what is going to happen, you know, it's kind of predicting whether it's a good enough match really."

7.11 SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR THE QUALITY OF THE PRACTICE

The chapter has examined the priorities of the practice as they emerged in the range and incidence of topics raised for discussion and the salience they were given. These priorities were discussed in relation to standards drawn from the theoretical model and the approach provided a further and more focused view on the extent to which the practice realised its goal of child-centred decision making.

The model standards provide a set of minimum conditions to be met if matching practice were to serve the interests of the child unequivocally and demonstrably. If the conditions been met in the practice, if there had been unambiguous evidence of this in the discussion transcripts, then the practice could be said to have been meeting its ostensible goal. However, detailed scrutiny of the transcripts revealed the practice to be deviating from the model standards in almost every respect. The key areas of deviation are summarised below in relation to each of the specific areas of comparison.

Where the model standard emphasises shared clarity about the child's background and placement terms and objectives, the practice was rather vague about these. Discussion of the background to the referral was limited, it appeared, by a fear of trespassing into areas which were understood not to be the proper business of matching meetings. Confining themselves largely to the problems of the present, the practitioners focused on the continuing inadequacies of the child's family and the current placement which together made the case for the new placement urgent and compelling. Its purposes beyond resolving the immediate problem of somewhere acceptable for the child to be placed tended to remain implicit. None of the placements recommended was given a specific duration and reunification, if addressed at all, was treated as a vague hope rather than something to actively plan for and work towards.

Where the model places emphasis on nurturing and sustaining the child's significant relationships outside the placement, the emphasis in the practice was confined to the management of home visits. The range of important relationships in the child's life considered in the practice was narrow and largely confined to her immediate family. There was no evidence that the practitioners were concerned to agree strategies to help the child maintain relationships from the placement with those to whom she was emotionally attached and no discussion about how deteriorating contact with her family might be improved.

The aim in the model of discussing a child's care history is to ensure that strategies are agreed which help to ensure that prior instability in care is not reproduced in the new placement. The practitioners in the setting appeared to be sensitive to the issues arising from prior placement breakdowns but unable to translate this into forward strategies to protect the new placement.

The model represents a highly individualised process of placement matching in which the properties of a particular resource are examined in relation to the particular problems and strengths of the child. In the practice, the uniqueness of both the child and the resource was submerged by stronger tendencies to problematise and stereotype the personal qualities of referred children , to subsume their individual needs within a generalised response to their neediness, and to give only superficial attention to the unique properties of the resources. The certainty that the child needed a foster placement and the self-evident fact that the carers were prepared to consider providing one may have persuaded the practitioners that more detailed examination of compatibility between a particular child and the resource allocated for her was unnecessary.

In pursuit of an individualising quality of decision making, the model focuses down on the particular behavioural, emotional, educational, health and developmental needs and problems that apply in a particular case. The object of this is to ensure that the needs and problems are fully understood and that appropriate measures can be built into the placement to help the child meet or overcome them. The approach taken in the practice to these specific areas of potential need was hesitant, lacunose and static. There was little evidence of forward thinking about strategies to resolve problems and meet needs and, where placement supports were suggested to this end, they remained at the level of suggestion. Specifically, potential or identified behavioural problems were generally considered in their presenting form without analysis of the underlying emotional causes and the only approach confidently suggested for the carers to adopt was that of applying firm limits. The child's education was routinely raised as a topic for discussion but the prevailing issue for the practitioners appeared to be the

convenience of the school placement for the care placement, not educational continuity and attainment for the child. The child's health was not seriously considered at all and her personal social development was discussed without any clear intent. Where needs in any of these areas were identified, they were rarely translated into concrete objectives or tasks for the placement and scant attention was given to how and by whom these were to be carried out.

Central to the model are the views and preferences of those most directly involved in the prospective placement. The practice generally gave an important place to the perspectives and anxieties of the carers but the views of the child, and particularly those of the parents, had a very subordinate place.

Finally, the practice deviated from the model standard in respect of the way the matching process was brought to a close. The standard prescribes a clear ending with reiteration of the main points of the preceding discussion, recapitulation of the terms of the proposed placement, and the agreement of measures to protect the child in the event that the placement comes to an unplanned end. The practice, by contrast was inconclusive. It ended in a spirit of optimism that allowed the prospect of failure to be acknowledged only where it could be associated with the child's attitude to the placement. The need to plan for this eventuality did not arise for the practitioners. Reference was made to the fact that issues had been aired but not resolved in the foregoing discussion and the clear implication was that this was precisely what the practitioners intended for the practice. The test of the placement's suitability was to continue into the introductions and beyond. Detailed placement arrangements were postponed to some indeterminate later stage.

An overarching standard of the model is that placement selection for a child should be based on evidence of the qualities of need to be met and of the resource to be provided. Matching in the model is about weighing up the evidence and, on the basis of it, ensuring that a selected placement has the components it needs for optimal security and effectiveness. The practice seemed to be more concerned with the emotional appeal of the referral and the resource. The placement offered the child 'a

chance' and the child presented the carers with 'a challenge'. She was needy and they represented the ideal solution. The child as a unique individual with particular placement needs seemed to become lost in this emotionality. Factors that might undermine the placement and the opportunity to reduce their became quite marginal issues.

Chapter 8.

ROLE RELATIONS IN MATCHING

8.1. Introduction

Previous chapters have considered the structure and content of the practice in relation to its decision making. The present chapter moves the focus to the performance of the decision makers. It addresses the question of whether the performance was consistent with serving the interests of the referred child as the paramount concern.

The study has viewed the activity of matching in the setting as a task-centred discursive activity constituted through the shared understandings, co-operative effort and speech interactions of its participants. There were certain contextual pressures and constraints on the activity and certain conventions and implicit rules that shaped it, but it was through the verbal exchanges between the participants that the activity acquired its concrete reality in any given instance. It was also through these verbal exchanges that the various practitioners of matching articulated their roles as Seekers, providers and regulators of the placements. The focus of this chapter is the pattern of these exchanges, what they revealed about the way the roles were performed and what influence of each role had on the decision making.

As explained in Chapter 4, practitioners in the sample were assigned to one or other of three role groups; Seekers, Providers and Regulators. The classification was made on the basis of a practitioner's relationship in the matching context to the child's case, the resource or the agency's responsibilities under the Boarding Out and Fostering of Children Regulations 1985 to monitor the quality of foster placements. The child's social worker and current carer are defined as Seekers, the carers and their liaison worker as Providers and the chairperson and members of the matching panel as Regulators. The table below shows individual participants' responsibilities in the practice and how they were assigned to the role groups.

Role group	Title in setting	Responsibility in matching
REGULATORS	Matching panel chairperson	To chair meeting and co-ordinate panel on behalf of agency. To provide objective evaluation of the placement match
	Matching panel member(s)	To provide objective evaluation of the placement match
SEEKERS	Child's social worker	To represent child in acquiring a suitable foster placement
	Child's current carer	To provide an additional perspective on child and her needs
PROVIDERS	Carer liaison worker	To represent resource provision.
	Proposed carer(s)	To provide the resource e

These are broad groupings to simplify data analysis and demonstrate general findings about role performance in relation to issues that have arisen at earlier stages of the study. The chapter will, however, distinguish between different types of practitioner within the broad group where this is necessary to explicate the findings.

The findings of earlier phases of analysis have shown the extent to which the practice departed from the standards of the theoretical model and therefore from its own, child-centred aspirations. In form and content, the practice seemed destined not to realise this aspiration because it failed to centre on the key issues of what a particular child needed from a foster placement and whether the resource allocated could provide it. To some extent, this can seen as a consequence of decision making procedures to which the agency had paid too little critical attention and for which it made its expectations insufficiently precise. Yet, there were also conflictual external forces bearing in upon the decision making which may have contributed to the form it took. On the one hand, practitioners were encouraged to make foster placements for children in care. On the other hand, the supply of these resources was scarce, precarious and relied considerably on the Providers' goodwill. In any instance of placement making, the interests of acquiring the desired quality of resource had to be reconciled with both the quality of the resources available at the time and the need to maintain the goodwill of its Providers.

It has been argued in Chapter 5 of the study that role performance in the matching meetings was crucial to maintaining paramouncy of the child's interests in the decision making and an even-handed reconciliation of the potentially competing interests of Seekers and Providers. As holders of a scarce, sought after commodity, those

providing it were theoretically in a stronger position to assert their interests than those seeking the resource were to assert theirs. The Seeker's responsibility for securing the best placement for the child could therefore be compromised. The regulating role of the independent panel presiding over the meetings was therefore key to ensuring that this did not happen.

We have seen that the practice gave Providers a central place in the decision to proceed with a placement. They were party to the consensus by which the decision was made and were given the opportunity in the course of discussion to have their questions answered and their anxieties assuaged. Their role was therefore potentially a very influential one. The Seeker's role should have been equally influential. They were also party to the decision and their interests on behalf of the child were consonant with the ostensible purpose of the decision making. However, findings on the quality of the practice have raised questions about the balance of influence between these two roles. The discussions produced much more extensive description of the child that of the resource. Almost no critical attention was given to the nature of resource properties but the problems the child presented were focused on the such an extent that her entire image, and that of her family, were problematised. The analysis of role performance aims to shed light on the contribution it made to the quality of discussion.

The method of analysing role performance drew upon the theory of the interlocutory force of utterances and tacit speaker rights that was discussed in Chapter 3. The application of the theory to analysis of the data was described as analytic phase V. The method plotted the characteristic pattern of utterances by each role group in each discussions and across the sample. All utterances in the discussion texts were categorised as questions, answers or comments, there incidence was counted and the count was used to plot characteristic patters. Being the more forceful utterance in terms of driving the agenda of discussion, the degree of questioning be each of the role groups gave a measure of their tacit speaker rights in the setting and their control over the agenda. As a form of utterance heavily conditioned by its preceding

questions, the degree of answering showed the extent to which answering speakers were led by the agenda. As a more neutral, less constrained and less directive form of utterance, the pattern of commenting would show the degree to which participants were free to make comments of their own unconditioned by the terms of a particular question. Thus, by examining the pattern of utterances it was possible supersede other interpersonal variables and arrive at a reasonably sound profile of the relative influence participants had over the process and priorities of the matching practice. The results of this part of the analysis are discussed in sections 8.2. and 8.3.

The analysis was extended by considering certain qualities in the characteristic utterances made by the role groups and these are discussed in section 8.4. Section 8.5. discusses the inferences that can be drawn from the findings .

8.2. Questions, Answers and Comments; The Pattern of Utterances in Matching Talk

A first finding from the analysis was that question-answer exchanges predominated in the discussions and this appeared to be a pattern independent of other variables such as the duration of the discussion, the number of people present, the nature of the case being matched, and the extent to which the child and resource were already known to the Regulators. Figure 1 below shows the relative proportion of questions, answers and comments found in each of the discussions. Each column in the chart represents one complete discussion and the blue portion shows the proportion of questions put in that discussion. The dark red portion indicates the proportion of answers given and the yellow portion, the proportion of comments made. (The tabulations from which this chart is derived are set out in table 1 of Appendix F)

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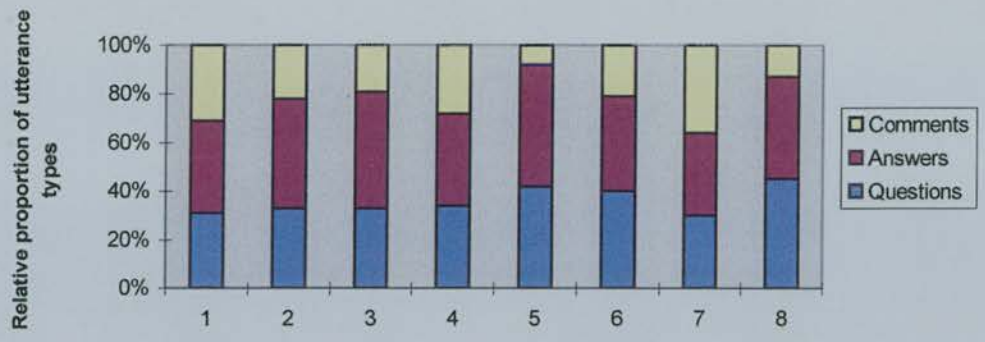
Figure 1. Proportion of questions, answers and comments in each discussion

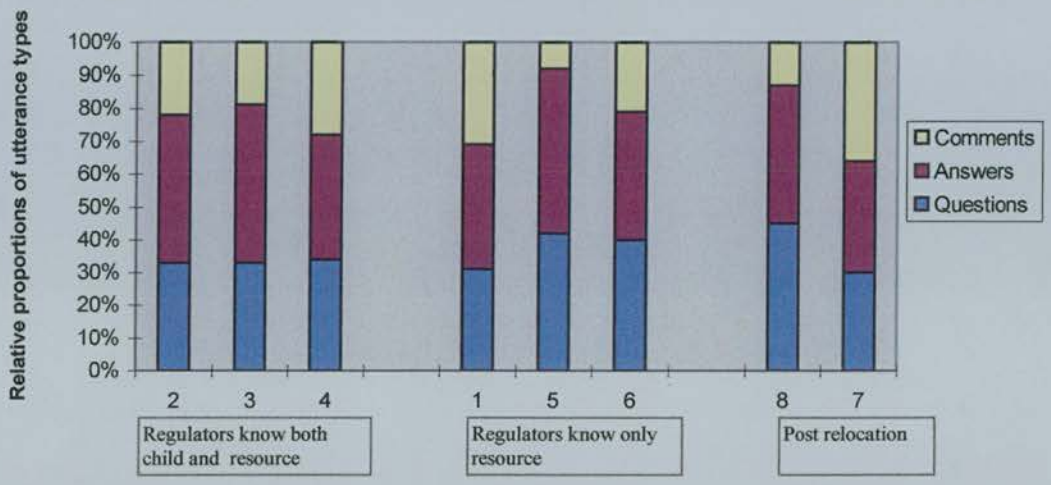


As figure 1 shows, upwards of sixty per cent of utterances in any discussion were found to be either questions or answers. Between thirty-one and forty-five per cent of utterances were questions and between thirty-four and fifty per cent of utterances were answers. The higher proportions of answers relative to questions is explained by occasions when two or more participants would respond to the same question. The proportion of utterances made outside of linked questions and answers was less than a third. The proportion of comments in across the sample varied between eight and thirty-one per cent. Thus we see that the practice was a predominantly interrogative activity, as opposed to an exchange of views through debate, for example.

As a test of the stability of this finding, the data were compared between the discussions according to an important administrative variable first examined in Chapter 6. Since the administrative variable effected how familiar the Regulators were already likely to be with the child's case and the resource it may also have affected the level of questioning in the discussions, in that more or less information on one or other of the entities may have needed to be sought. Figure 2 below shows the results of this comparison. The first three columns represent the type of discussion in which the Regulators were appointed from the same district from which both the resource and child's case originated and they would therefore know something of both. The type of meeting represented in the next four columns was that in which the Regulators were familiar with the resource, because it was based in their district, but not the child, whose case originated elsewhere. The last two columns represent discussions 7

and 8 that were held under the new system in which a matching panels were appointed from the district where the child's case originated and expected to be familiarity with it.

Figure 2. Proportion of questions, answers and comments in discussions compared by type



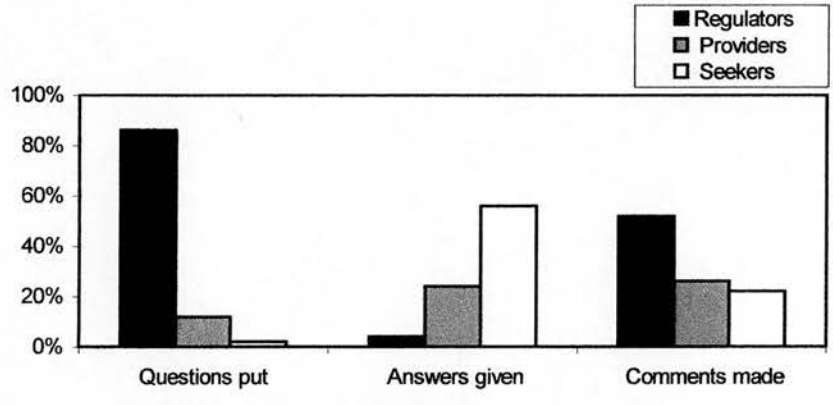
One might have expected the proportion of questions (and therefore of answers also) to be lower in discussions where both child and resource were known on the basis that there would be less need to generate information about them in this way. This appears not to have been the case in practice and the findings suggest that these background circumstances made little if any difference to the interrogatory pattern of the talk. That is to say, there was a similar degree of variation within each discussion type in the amount of questioning occurring and no type stood out as demonstrably different from another. Prior knowledge of child or resource did not appear to reduce the amount of questioning and it is reasonable to deduce from this that questioning and responding to questions was a fundamental characteristic of the practice.

The agenda of discussion in the practice can be said to have been characteristically driven by questioning contributions that produced corresponding answering contributions. By looking at who was making these contributions we can begin to see the relative power and influence of the different role groups over the form that the agenda took.

8.3. WHO ASKED, WHO ANSWERED, WHO COMMENTED AND WHO LISTENED; THE DIVISION OF LABOUR IN THE MATCHING TALK

The analysis went on to compare the patterns of participation between the three role groups. These patterns were examined across the sample by reference to the division of labour, in the first instance, between questioning, answering and commenting. The column chart in figure 3 shows the results of this comparison in the form of averages and the findings from which the chart is drawn are set out in tables 2 to 9 in Appendix F. Each trio of columns represents one of the three categories of utterance. Within each trio of columns, the black one represents the utterances of the Regulators, the grey one the utterances of the Providers, and the white column represents the utterances of the Seekers.

Figure 3. Average proportion of contributions made as questions, answers or comments by each participant group



As we see graphically illustrated in the first trio of columns in figure 3, the Regulators (black column) were found to put the overwhelming majority of the questions across the sample. They put eighty-six per cent of all questions on average and their share of questions in individual discussions ranged between eighty-three and ninety-four per cent (see table 3, Appendix F). To a far lesser extent and more variably, Providers also put questions (grey column in first trio). On average, they contributed twelve per cent of questions but this represents a range between four and twenty per cent in the individual discussions. The Seekers put hardly any questions at all (white column). Their average was a mere two per cent and in three discussions they asked no questions at all. By virtue of their consistently dominant command of questions,

therefore, the Regulators can be seen to have been leading the agenda of discussion and directing the course of enquiries which generated its substantive content. The Providers had some influence on the agenda through questioning but the Seekers' influence by this means was negligible.

The Seekers' participation was considerably more prominent in the activity of answering questions (white column in second trio of figure 3). They generally provided the vast majority of answers (72% on average) and in some discussions their share reached over ninety per cent (see table 5, Appendix F). The Seekers' average was lowered by one particular discussion in which an exceptional amount of discussion focused on the feelings and concerns of the carer's daughter with a correspondingly high incidence of answers being provided by the carer. This same exceptional case raised the average proportion of answers given by Providers to forty-nine per cent where, in the remaining seven discussions the range was between seven and forty-six per cent. Regulators were seldom involved in answering questions from other participants. Their average share of answers was only four per cent with a range of between one and nine per cent in individual discussions. Thus we seen the Seekers emerging as typically the most active informants in the discussions by virtue of the extent to which they were responsible for providing answers. They were furnishing the discussions with the content sought by the Regulators through their questions. Providers, by contrast, appeared to be contributing very little by this means.

The distribution of commenting followed a similar but far less extreme order with Regulators providing most of the comments (52% average), Providers commenting half as often (26%), and Seekers commenting the least (22%). There was wide variation in the distribution of comments in individual discussions, however, and in one extreme case, Seekers made thirty-one per cent of the comments where Providers made only three per cent. (See table 7, Appendix F). It is likely that this variability arose in part from the variation in the number of participants in each role group across the sample. Seekers commenting fell, for instance, where there was no current carer present and the social worker was acting alone.

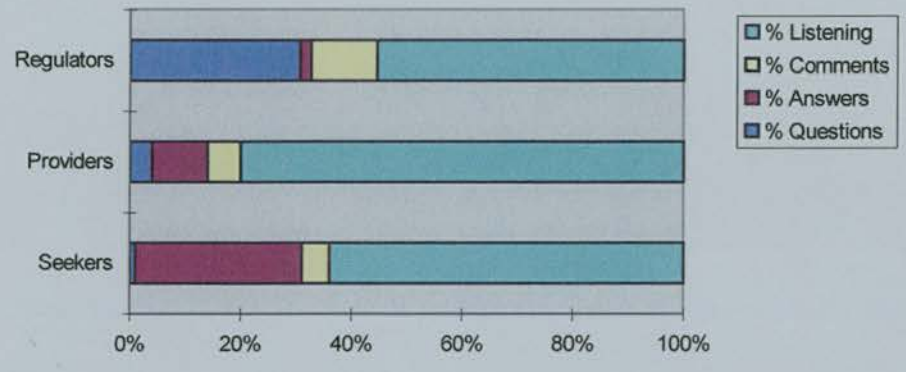
It is also a consequence of the nature of commenting in that it is an type of speech act that is freed of the both the obligation to conform to the occurrence and terms of a question and of the responsibility for obtaining a response. Broadly speaking, people comment as they see fit in order to communicate what they wish to. In this respect, the extent of commenting by the role groups illustrates the freedom in the role to contribute substantive content to the discussion of their own choosing. On this dimension, the Regulators emerge as not only the most powerful in eliciting content from others but also the most free to add their own content to that which they elicit. The Providers were relatively unconstrained by having to answer questions and also had some freedom to contribute at will. The Seekers appear to have been the most constrained of all by the obligation to answer questions and generally the least free to contribute content of their choice outside of this obligation. The Seekers therefore emerge as having had the least power and influence over the agenda and content of the matching discussions.

Participation in group discussion does not consist solely of making utterances. It also involves listening to the utterances of others. It is a fundamental rule of all forms of interactive talk that it is built upon turn-taking by the interactants (Sacks *et al.*, 1974). As a general principle, while a speaker is speaking, other participants are listening (or at least silent) and communication effectively stops when this rule ceases to be observed. Applying this conversational rule in the analytic treatment of the data, the incidence of listening was taken to equate with the incidence of speaking as measured by the total number of different utterances. All participants except the speaker were taken to be contributing a 'listening interlude' to the process of discussion. When the speaker changed, the range of participants contributing the new listening interlude also changed. By calculating the proportion of contributions made by each of the role groups as questions, answers, comments or listening interludes, it was possible to arrive at a more complete profile of role performance and status in the discussions.

Even allowing for the occasional overlaps of speech, interruptions, pauses and possible (but invisible) moments of inattentiveness, the procedure seemed sufficiently sound for the level of analysis attempted.

The bar chart in Figure 4, shows the results of this calculation. Each bar represents the total contributions of one of the role groups and the coloured sections in them represent the average proportion of questioning, answering, commenting and listening in which the groups engaged. The figures from which this chart is drawn are set out in Table 10, Appendix F and it is important at this point to recall that the measure is the number and type of contributions, not the length of time they took.

Figure 4. The division of labour between questioning, answering, commenting and listening



The first bar in figure 4 shows the patterns of contribution by the Regulators. In most discussions, this was generally the largest role group by one or two members and, as we have seen they did most of the questioning and commenting. Not surprisingly therefore, their speech contributions at an average of forty four per cent of their total contributions were at the highest level of all the groups. Just over half their contributions (56%) were made in the form of listening interludes. (Turquoise portion) .

Seekers were often the smallest participant group in the meetings, reduced to one member, when the current carer was not taking part. The second bar shows the contributions of the Seekers and just under a third of these (30%) involved answering questions (dark red portion). Their listening interludes comprised sixty-four percent of their contributions but a proportion of these broadly equivalent to the number of their

answers (i.e. 30%) must been taken up in attending to the questions they were being asked. After deducting the proportion of these and the proportion of their own questions and comments, what remained of their listening interludes for private processing of their thoughts and the responses and comments of others appeared to be very limited (i.e. 100% contributions - (30% answers + 30% attending to questions + 14% comments + 2% questions) = 24% unconstrained listening interludes).

The Providers were a group comprising of two or three members, depending on whether or not both the proposed carers were present. Despite their numbers, however, their combined contributions as speech reached, on average, a level of only fourteen per cent. The Providers thus emerge as primarily an audience for the interrogative exchanges between the Regulators and the Seekers with the interlocutory space and freedom to silently process what they were hearing.

The quantitative analysis of the type and distribution of contributions to discussion by each role group has revealed characteristic patterns of influence on the agenda and the generation of discussion content. It has also revealed characteristics of their relation to each other. The Regulators can be seen to be the most powerful of the three groups. They led the agenda through their questioning of other participants and were able to make the most of opportunities to contribute comments of their own. Their listening interludes were free for them to assimilate the contributions of others because they were seldom required to attend to answering questions themselves. The superior influence the Regulators had in the decision making is consistent with their oversight role in the proceedings but equally, they can be held largely responsible for the quality of that decision making as this study has found it to be.

The Providers had little influence on the agenda through questions and contributed more through the activity of commenting. They were required to respond to some questions but generally they were the most silent of the groups with the freedom to privately assimilate what they heard from everyone else. They were apparently not required to be other than silent for most of the time, for the Regulators' chose to

address most of their questions to the Seekers. While the providers may have had little power to determine what content was sought and provided, they had the power of an audience, or even a jury, to listen and assess without themselves being assessed.

The Seekers were the least influential in controlling the content of discussion through questions or contributing to it freely through comments but they were obliged to provide most of the *directed* content delivered through answers. Theirs appears to have been the most constrained role of all. When they were not actively answering questions they were attending to what they were being asked in order to answer them. They were not tacitly empowered to put questions themselves to any significant extent and they had little opportunity to sit back, assimilate and evaluate the exchanges between other participants. This placed the Seekers in a rather weak position from which to assert the child's interests as the dominant focus of discussion if the Regulators failed to do so.

8.4. The Nature of Contributions and Their Role Defining Properties

The analysis continued by focusing on the nature of questioning, answering and commenting in the practice and the inferences that can be drawn from this about the performance, status and inter-relationships of the Seeker, Regulator and provider roles. In the following paragraphs, participants will be referred to by their role group membership and the title they were given in the setting. Speaker codes are used to signify both the role group (S,P,R) and the different members of it (1,2,3). The table below displays the codes as they related to each participating speaker.

Participant and speaker codes

Role group	Title in setting	Speaker Code.
REGULATORS	Matching panel chairperson	R1
	Matching panel member(s)	R2, R3 etc. in order of speaking
SEEKERS	Child's social worker	S1
	Child's current carer	S2
PROVIDERS	Carer liaison worker	P3
	Proposed carer(s)	P1, P2 in order of speaking

8.4.1. The potency of questions and comments

We have seen that the practice consisted substantially of questioning by the Regulators primarily of the Seekers and to a much lesser extent of Providers. Through their initiating and follow-up questions, the Regulators controlled the delivery of substantive content that informed the decision making about a placement. Most Regulator questions were put by the panel chairperson and the questioning would often take the form of a sustained, staccato dialogue between the panel chairperson and the social worker with panel members adding occasional comments from the wings. The typical extract in figure 5 below illustrates the power of questions and next questions and shows how chairperson and panel members typically performed their combined Regulator role. The extract is taken from a lengthy interrogative sequence in discussion 8 in which the chairperson (R1) is leading questions to the social worker (S1).

Figure 5. The power of questions and next questions (from discussion 8)

1	R1	Right, so they came up here?
2	S1	Yes. I think Mrs M (mother) was pregnant when she actually went down to get Carol
3		and, eh, now E-'s three. Carol was apparently very quiet and withdrawn when she
4		came up although she seemed to be pleased to be with her mum.
5	R1	Since that point it's really been R-'s (psychiatric service's) involvement then?
6	S1	Yes. I think it (i.e. psychiatric report) said that R- were just becoming involved with K-
7		(Carol's sister) prior to Carol's returning.
8	R1	Do you know what the grounds of referral were at that point to R-?
9	S1	It would be behavioural. K- (.) I appears to have been her behaviour (.)
10	R2	It just seems as if they came up and then K- came two months before Carol, then they
11		were very quickly through R-'s door. They had no time to settle!

In line 1, the chairperson (R1) puts a question to the social worker (S1) that follows from and summarises a prior answer. By this means, the chairperson is determining that the topic of the family history will be sustained. He then puts a follow up question in line 5 that redirects the topic to that of the family's involvement with psychiatric services. In line 8, the questioning sustains the topic to explore another aspect of it. The extract illustrates very clearly how questions framed the delivery of substantive content in the sample discussions.

In line 10, the exchange departs from the interrogatory pattern when the panel member (R2) takes an opportunity to comment. Her utterance summarises and

analyses the substantive content of the exchange between R1 and S1 and draws from it the salient point, "**They had no time to settle!**". Although a smaller component of the discussion than questioning without its power to direct content delivery, commenting had tremendous potency in respect of highlighting and interpreting the content delivered.

Questioning and answering tie both the parties involved into a dialogue on the subjects chosen by the questioner. Commenting, on the other hand, is an unelicited utterance and arises from the speaker's independent choice to speak on a topic without being specifically asked to do so. While questions and next questions set the agenda of topics and issues for discussion, it was in the commenting that these were often developed and resolved towards the making of a decision. By providing analysis, evaluation and synthesis of the material delivered through questions and answers, commenting established an explicit interpretation of what this material signified and helped to explicitly construct the argument (i.e. the process of reasoning), towards the ultimate placement decision. Figure 6 illustrates this potency in a single commentary utterance by the chairperson of discussion 1. The extract follows a sequence in which questions had been asked and answered about the child's family history and the death of her father at Christmas time.

Figure 6. Interpretation and analysis by comment (from discussion 1)

R1	There are lots of references to Leslie's feelings and them being something people don't know very much about at all. And that plainly, in placement, if it goes for any length of time, may well become quite a significant part of it. It's clearly a significant bit of the task, is working with that area. And eh, things like that Christmas could be quite a difficult time for all sorts of reasons. It may be a family myth about feelings about Christmas, it may not. You know, we're just ...

In his utterance, the chairperson (R1) reflects that the child's feelings have been referred to several times in the preceding exchanges without ever being clarified. He then places this information in the context of the prospective placement and draws out its significance for that placement in terms of 'a bit of the task'; the task, we infer, of learning about the child's feelings. His comment *places* the information in the decision-making.

Another extract, from discussion 6 in figure 7, shows how sequential commenting by members of all three participant groups builds an argument in a similar way. They sift out what they consider to be the salient points of information they have heard in the discussion or read in the background papers and draw inferences from it with the prospective placement in mind. The extract in figure 7 follows a question-answer sequence between the Regulators and the Seekers on the child's current placement. It begins where the child's social worker (S1) is rounding off a descriptive answer to a prior question with the analysis that the limits placed on the child in her current placement have been good for her. The chairperson (R1) develops the analysis and, finally, the liaison worker (P3) begins to set it in the context of the proposed placement.

Figure 7. Construction by comment (from discussion 6)

1	S1	In the same way there's been a start made on that being at M- ((current placement)),
2		there are people who have obviously encouraged her to talk and spend time with her
3		and stuff, and like I say, M- have also, em things are not great just now, but they have
4		gone through a process of putting limits on her, you know . Had she come straight
5		from the community to yourself I think she would be quite a different girl but she has
6		had limits, she has been more restricted, she acknowledges the good in that as well
7		and like that she is more able to speak about things.
8	R1	It does come across in the report ((i.e. the background papers)) too that she
9		acknowledges that M- has helped her. It has been a positive, you know, those people
10		taking an interest and caring about what happens to her. I'm not saying that Mum
11		didn't but obviously Dad or step-dad very clearly doesn't give a damn which must be
12		very difficult to live in that sort of atmosphere.
13	S1	And she appreciates people spending time with her and accepting her, she does like to
14		be liked although the behaviour often displays the opposite she does, she's the kind of
15		kid who responds to that.
16	P3	She sounds more responsive than Diane in that respect, Diane was quite hard to
17		reach.

In lines 8 to 10, R1 selects the benefits to the child of her care experience as the salient point and goes on to contrast this, in lines 10 to 12, with the perceived short-comings of the child's home life. In turn, S1 moves the argument forward by selecting the child's positive response to the treatment she has received in care as the next salient point (lines 13 to 15). P3 then moves the argument forward again into the context of the prospective placement by making a comparison between this child and the apparently less responsive child whom the carers had fostered before. The practitioners have progressed the focus of the argument very rapidly through their comments from information about the child's past response to substitute care to the

prospects for the future placement, reinforcing the case for the placement by noting in passing the inadequacies of the child's own family.

The illustrations of how questioning and commenting functioned in the practice begin to flesh out the bare bones of the division of interlocutory labour demonstrated in the distribution of utterances. The Regulators characteristically had the largest share of the questioning and commenting in the discussions. By virtue of this, they not only drove the agenda but also had the most substantial role of all the groups in shaping the argument that progressed the decision making. The Providers had some influence in this but far less than the Regulators. The Seekers, with their minimal commenting and negligible questioning had the least. Theirs was a role that followed in the wake of the argument largely developed by the other role groups.

This asymmetry was reinforced by a further finding in the quality of questioning that I discuss next.

8.4.2 Questions, alliances, and matters of courtesy

Seekers put very few questions in the course of the discussions. To the extent that they did, their questions tended to be directed to their partner Seeker, (*i.e.* the child's social worker to current carer and *vice-versa*) for corroboration or elaboration of the same answer. See, for example, the two extracts in figure 8 below.

Figure 8. Typical Seekers' questions
i) From discussion 1

R1	*Asks question about the child's preference for remaining at her current school.*
S1	She's not going to get the chance, is she?
S2	No, I really think she's at the stage where she's not really able to make those kind of decision for herself, we have to do it for her.

ii) From discussion 2

S1	Answers question from R1
S2	I don't think she's aware of that. She's never mentioned it, has she?
S1	No, I don't think so

Their questions were part of their answers, as it were. There were only three instances in the entire sample where Seekers put questions to Providers and in all cases they

concerned some minor detail of the resource or the prospective carers' feelings about the future placement with them. The Seekers role in the practice, it seemed, did not include seeking information about the resource for themselves in the process of matching.

Most questions from Providers were put either to the Regulator, for clarification on some point, ("Would a referral to (the Educational Psychologist) stop the placement then?") or, more frequently, to one or other of the Seekers. Enquiries were variously made of Seekers about the background, history, daily habits or behaviour management problems of the referred child. One Provider also asked about the quality of the child's relationship with her social worker and its implications for the proposed placement with him. Although Providers asked far fewer questions of Seekers than did the Regulators, they asked a similar range of questions. The type of questions put by the carers and liaison workers in the Provider role group could be indistinguishable from the type of questions put by Regulators. We can see in Figure 9 below something close to role-sharing between the P3 (the liaison worker) and the chairperson (R1).

Figure 9. Liaison worker questioning current carer (discussion 8)

1	R1	How is she when she comes back from home?
2	S2	She's all right. She's just back to her normal self when she comes in.
3	R1	Seems no hangover at all?
4	S2	Nothing. Just say 'How did the weekend go?'. 'All right'. That's it.
5	P3	Do you get the feeling that this lass really needs to talk out what has happened to her
6		or do you think that it's just part of her personality that she might (.) ?

P3 is following up in lines 5 and 6 a line of questioning initiated and pursued by R1 in line 1 and 3 on the behaviour of the child when she returns from a home visit and its possible meaning in terms of the child's emotional state. There were several instances of this type of exchange in the data that gave the impression an alliance between the Provider and Regulator role. Both were engaged in seeking information about the child albeit that overall, the Providers were less active in this endeavour than the Regulators.

Not only were the questions put by the Seekers and Providers apparently directed at different ends, the questions put to them were of a qualitatively different type also.

Looking back through the extracts used to illustrate earlier findings in the chapter, we can see that the questions put to Seekers tended to be of the direct, closed form which required specific answers, **"Since that point it's really been R-'s ((psychiatric services) involvement then?"** in figure 5 and **"How is she when she comes back from home...?"** in figure 9. But they nevertheless tended to be directive. The form of the question, **"Right, so they came up here?"**, in figure 5 for example, reinforces the tacit obligation on the recipient to respond in its specific terms by narrowing those terms to a particular topic. The respondent is required to 'tell me about this' as a 'duty' to inform.

By contrast, the form of question most commonly put to the Providers was an opening of an opportunity to respond in terms of the respondent's choosing; **"What do you think...?"; "Do you feel happy about that or (.)? ; "Do you have any particular views or things you would like to say...?" " Tell us a bit about what you're thinking at the moment and C- ((liaison worker)) can help if you like"**. Here, the obligation inherent in a question of any kind is mitigated by the substantive content of the question actually put such that it becomes considerably more indulgent towards the recipient. It is an invitation to contribute; to contribute moreover, without the requirement of objectivity implicit in the duty to inform laid on the Seekers. Providers were offered the opportunity to share what information they chose to, express a view or convey a perspective.

There were, thus, different tacit rules applying in the talk according to whether the dialogue involved the Seeker or the Provider and different qualities of information would be fed into the decision-making as a result. Most of the questions put to Seekers and Providers were addressed respectively to the child's social worker and the prospective carers. The nature of Seeker and Provider roles were therefore constituted in the talk primarily in relation to these two central figures and the different discursive rules applying to the roles may have been in part due to the different status of these participants in the agency. The social workers were employees of the agency and to that extent, like the Regulators, they represented it. The carers on the other hand were only contracted to the agency for placement provision and represented only themselves. In a sense, they were guests of the agency at the matching meetings, albeit that their attendance was an explicit expectation of

their contract. Basic rules of etiquette would hold that guests are entitled to certain courtesies and this may have influenced the manner in which they were treated in the meetings. At the same time, these guests controlled access to a resource that was highly prized by the agency and whose goodwill was critical to the supply of that resource. To risk of offending them or making them feel ill at ease by close questioning of the particular provision they made may have seemed to the agency representatives too great a risk to take.

8.5. Summary of the findings and Inferences on the contribution of role performance to the quality of the decision making

The analysis discussed in the chapter has examined the way Seeker, Provider and Regulator roles were actually performed in the samples with two issues in mind; what degree of influence did each role appear to exert in the decision making and how might this relate to the quality of discussion found in earlier waves of analysis.

The analysis of utterances found the decision making in the practice to be being driven along principally by Regulators asking questions of the Seekers. The Providers tended to be the silent audience for this interrogatory dialogue.

It has been argued that the way the Regulator role was performed would be crucial to a quality of decision making that gives primacy to the child's needs while also reconciling any competing interests between Seeker and Provider. The Regulators in the practice were found to be well placed to achieve this standard. They had the most control over the agenda of discussion through their superior command of the questioning and its capacity to set and change topics. Through their command of the commenting, they had the greatest influence over the inferences drawn from the content of answers and therefore over the argument on which the placement decision was based. The tacit speaker rights of Regulators constituted in the practice placed them in the most influential position in the decision making and this accords with their given role as independent arbiters.

However, the Regulators appeared to use their influential position to extract information almost exclusively from the Seekers for they chose to put few questions to the Providers. This helps to explain the dominance of user-related topics in the discussions. We can deduce from the findings about how these topics were discussed that few questions were put about the child's particular needs and how they might best be met in the placement, or if they were, the Regulators were drawing difference inferences from the replies.

Moreover, when the Regulators did put questions to the Providers, they were in a qualitatively different form to those put to the Seekers. Where the latter were required to answer specific points of information or opinion, Providers were treated to a more open questions that allowed them far more latitude in how they might reply. The questions put to Providers were therefore likely to be less efficient in eliciting specific information and this was likely to have contributed to the absence of information in the discussions on the resource at issue.

The direct influence of the Providers on the course of decision making was largely confined to the comments they chose to make. They asked some questions in a similar vein to those put by the Regulators but were required to provide little specific content through answers. Their tacitly assigned role as audience allowed them to sit back and assimilate the information sharing and interpretation by the other participants.

The Seekers were the principal informants in the discussions and the information they provided was largely determined by the way the Regulators framed the questions put to them. They had the least opportunity of all the groups for undemanding reflection because so much of their listening time would be taken up with the requirement to respond to requests for specific information. Their tacit right to question other participants appeared to be the weakest of all the groups and by virtue of this, the potential for them to influence the course of discussion was also weakest. Their capacity to assert the interests of the child was limited to what could be achieved with

their answers and the small amount of commenting they had the opportunity to engage in.

The rationale for the matching panel mechanism in the setting was that it would ensure that placements met the needs of the children they were for. Viewed from the perspective of the way Seeker, Provider and Regulator roles were actually performed, the mechanism seems to have been very weak in relation to this function. The Regulators appeared to be failing to steer the decision making process towards these ends. The presence of the Providers opened opportunities for a very thorough appraisal of the resource at hand but this appraisal was not made, although their performance in the decision making did provide them the opportunity to appraise the child. Finally, the relative weakness of the Seekers' position in the proceedings is inconsistent with placing the child at the heart of the decision making. Following the standards of the theoretical model, they should have been able to present the placement requirements of the child, debate with Regulators and Providers where resource properties were likely to meet the needs and where they would not and agree the terms of the placement in the child's interests. As we have seen from the findings of previous waves of analysis and as is confirmed by the analysis of role performance, this is not the way the practice worked.

Chapter 9.

ASPIRATIONS AND REALITIES; A POSTSCRIPT TO THE PRACTICE

9.1. Introduction

The general message in the findings of the study thus far has been that the practice was failing to meet its aspirations of child-centredness. It did not examine the resource against clear requirements based on the child's needs and strengths and did not agree plans for supporting the placement to reduce risk and enhance its effectiveness. Placements were made by talking about the child, reassuring the prospective carers and optimism. No plans were agreed to protect the child should the placement fail. It is possible that consideration was given to this before the meeting but if so, they were not reported to the matching meetings. It is also possible that planning deficits were rectified at some later point on which the study also has no data. At the same time, placement introductions were usually put in train immediately after the matching meeting and there would be little time then to make good any mistakes.

The placements appeared to be a gamble and in this penultimate chapter of the thesis, data from the follow up interviews with social workers will be used to show the outcomes of this gamble. The social workers, we recall, held the least influence over the course of the decision making but one may assume they were satisfied at the time with the decision to place. The placement outcomes are discussed in section 9.2.

In section 9.3, a practitioner perspective is taken on the practice with findings from the rating schedule completed by practitioners prior to their interviews and a selection of data from the full sample of practitioner interviews themselves. The rating schedule and interviews were not set up for this purpose, they focused on the individual cases, and not all interviewees offered comments about the practice in a general sense. The data were therefore too limited to provide a representative view from each of the

participant groups or the practitioners as a whole. Moreover, with the redesign of the study strategy, the interview data became marginal to the study of the decision making practice. It was then beyond the scope of the study to analyse the interview data as such. The selection of data is therefore presented in a form that speaks for itself with some assistance from annotation that links it to the findings of the study. This brings the chapter to a close.

9.2. Placement Outcomes

Notwithstanding the weaknesses found in the matching practice, the outcomes of the placements were a little surprising. Only one of them survived beyond six months and even in this case it was not going according to plan. Three of the placements failed to proceed beyond the process of introductions and a further three broke down within six months. Another placement survived for five months until the child had her sixteenth birthday when she discharged herself and, with the help of the carers, found organised accommodation in a YWCA hostel. The surviving placement had been intended to provide for a period of assessment to enable appropriate plans for the child's reunification with her family to be devised and implemented. After seven months, the child's contact with her own family had almost ceased entirely and reunification plans were postponed indefinitely. Figure 1 below summarises the outcome of each sample placement alongside its objectives as they were inferred from the discussion data in Chapter 7.

Figure 1. Objectives and outcomes

Event No.	Placement objectives	Placement outcomes
1 Lesley	Provide secure and stable home throughout remainder of childhood. Address challenging behaviour.	Introductions not completed. Child resisted placement and carers withdrew with agency support. Child returned to current residential placement.
2	5-12 month placement to assist child with personal development towards independence.	Child ended placement after 5 months. Carers helped her to arrange accommodation of her choice at the YWCA and look for work.

3	Six month, possibly longer placement to allow mother to re-settle herself and to provide child with stability meantime. Assist planned return home. Shared care with mother.	Introductions successfully completed. Placement disrupted after two-and-a -half months when carers moved house. Child placed with emergency carers.
4	Indeterminate length of placement to provide security and stability in care and control pending more satisfactory conditions for return of child home. Address behaviour problem.	Placement disrupted during introductions. Carers withdrew supported by agency. Child placed with emergency carers.
5	Indeterminate length of placement to provide emotional security and consistency and support for schooling. Ideally return home in due course but otherwise prepare for independence	Introductions completed successfully. Child found distance from home problematic and placement disrupted after three months when child ran away. Children's hearing returned child home.
6	Indefinite length of placement to provide security, stability and support for schooling. Return home unlikely due to step-father's attitude.	Introductions completed successfully then child returned home while carers took family holiday. Delay of four weeks in restarting placement following carers' family bereavement. Child returned reluctantly but did not settle. Placement broke down and returned to previous children's home.
7	Indeterminate length of placement to provide security, consistent care and firm limits on behaviour and movements to and from home. Ideally return home in due course.	Introductions not completed. Child rejected placement because she felt it would jeopardise her relationship with her mother. Child returned to previous residential placement.
8	Indeterminate length of placement to allow situation at home to be further investigated and resolved. Ideally return home in due course.	Introductions completed successfully. Child settled into placement and had frequent contact with her mother. Reunification process foundered on the problematic relationship between child and step-father. Child chose to stay in placement and gradually reduced contact with her home.

It was beyond the scope of the study to examine the placement outcomes in detail for the data available consisted only of the social worker's accounts. Certain themes and issued nevertheless emerged from this data that had a bearing on earlier study findings.

The first of these concerned the extent to which the practitioners appeared to be underestimating the strength and importance of family ties which was noted in the analysis of priorities in the practice. One of the placements that failed to progress beyond introductions was Melissa's (event 7). She had apparently liked the placement approved for her but rejected it on the grounds that her mother felt threatened by a

foster placement and this would jeopardise their relationship. She chose to stay in her current residential placement and rebuild her relationship with her mother from there. Melissa had been referred for a foster placement by a hospital social worker following her paracetamol overdose. He had been working with her for only a few months during which period Melissa and her mother were not communicating much and the social worker confessed to not understanding why this was so. The placement was made in the belief that Melissa needed a quality of family life she had not hitherto had but for Melissa, a different family was evidently not what she wanted for herself. In Laura's case (event 5), the social worker had worked with the family for years and had come to the conclusion that Laura would only have the stability and school support she needed in a foster placement. Reference was made at the matching to both the closeness of Laura's family and the distance of the placement from the family home. The practitioners had also speculated that Laura's attachment to her family would diminish once she had settled into the placement and made new friends in the area. In the event, Laura missed her family badly and during the three months she was in the placement made increasingly frequent unplanned visits home. Her mother was ask to persuade Laura to stay with the carers which Laura experienced as a rejection and ran away. The case was referred to a hearing and the panel sent Laura back home. She had been maintaining consistent school attendance up to the point of the follow-up interview with her social worker.

A second theme in the follow-up data to resonate with earlier findings was the issue about the extent to which information about the resource was fully examined prior to placement. The practice was found to be very weak in the area of examining resource properties and in two cases information about the resource that emerged after the child was placed contributed to its unplanned ending. Molly (event 3) had been placed for a respite period to allow her mother to establish a new home for them both. Her placement introductions were apparently completed successfully and she settled quickly. Within the first month of her placement the carers announced that they would be moving house in six weeks time to an area at some considerable distance from Molly's home and school. They had apparently been planning this before the matching

meeting but had not thought it necessary to inform their liaison worker. Molly's behaviour at school and in the placement deteriorated and, as the family were packing up to move, the placement broke down irrevocably and Molly was placed with emergency foster carers. In Wendy's case (event 2) it was poor information about the carer family's lifestyle that was the issue and her placement did not break down, she simply ended it after her sixteenth birthday. She had been referred for placement because her temporary foster placement had reached the end of its official term. A new placement was recommended at her matching meeting in the hope that she would be persuaded to stay in it until she was eighteen. The carers were very experienced and well known to the agency but it was not disclosed at the matching meeting that they had strong and active religious affiliations in which they liked to involve foster children. Wendy found this part of the placement very uncomfortable and this confirmed her decision to leave.

Thirdly, the outcomes showed evidence of the failure to agree the nature and implementation of placement plans. Lesley's placement (event 1) had been anticipated to be difficult. She had had several placement moves during the care episode and had several times been caught up in disruptive behaviour by the residents of the children's home where she was placed at the time of her matching meeting. She was prone to temper tantrums which had got her into trouble at school and in her care placements. She was also far from reconciled to the prospect of the foster placement and believed that agency staff were conspiring to keep her from her family. Her social worker was moving to a new job and would be able to support Lesley through the introductions but not much beyond. The case was unlikely to be allocated to a new social worker in the short-term and the practitioners at the matching meeting decided that she needed to be moved quickly from the children's home. For all these reasons, the placement was deemed by the practitioners to be one of high risk. Some discussion was had about engaging the assistance of a residential worker whom Lesley liked to accompany her during the introductory process and support her through the first weeks of the placement. Nothing further was said on the matter in the meeting but subsequently, the liaison worker took the unusual step of providing the carers with his

home phone number in case they needed help in a crisis. The introductions were arranged to begin on a specific date and this was communicated to Lesley. Unfortunately, an earlier date was communicated to the residential worker. By the time this mistake was rectified, Lesley was extremely tense and emotional. She felt it was part of the conspiracy. Furthermore, the residential worker was not available to accompany her on all her introductory visits as she had expected. She flew into a rage during her first overnight stay in the placement and , with the support of the liaison worker and social worker, the carers withdrew from the placement.

A fourth theme was the lack of contingency planning for the children and the impact of the breakdowns on their subsequent placements. Berridge and Cleaver (1987) have observed that when teenage placements come to an unplanned ending, its is usually within six to nine months of their start as the result of a crisis. This requires hasty and often unsatisfactory alternative arrangements to be made for the child which precipitate a further period of instability in care. Thoburn (1988) has emphasised the importance of contingency planning when making placements precisely to avoid this kind of chaos. Four of the sample placements broke down in crisis and for three of the children, this precipitated a period of instability and decline. School attendance was one of the casualties and further placement disruptions followed for the children. Figure 2 below summarises the events following placement breakdown in crisis.

Figure 2. Events following placement breakdown in crisis

Event no.	Events following placement disruption
1. Lesley	Returned to very unsettled period in original Children's Home. Case transferred to new social worker. Intermittent contact with dispersed family members but mother still not taking active role in her care. School placement broke down completely. Children's hearing applied compulsory supervision order for residential school. Children's home place maintained for weekends and school breaks, but plan to secure foster placement for this purpose.
3. Molly	Placed with emergency foster carers for two weeks then re-matched to new AFS resource. This placement broke down within three months and girl moved to children's home. School attendance gradually stopped
4. Christine	Placed with emergency carers for 2 weeks, then matched to new carer. Placement broke down. School placement also broke down. Reunification plan abandoned. Placed with emergency carers for a week then in Children's Home pending placement in residential school.
5 Laura	Girl felt rejected when mother tried to persuade her back to the placement and she ran away. She was found and returned to school with full attendance and became progressively more settled at home.

Linda's (6) placement did not so much break down as dissolve. It was interrupted shortly after the introductions by the carers' family holiday in which she was not included. The interruption became extended by a bereavement in the carers' family and Linda was left to drift over the summer school holidays. She became involved in drug taking and was received back into care. Two placement changes later she settled in residential school.

The striking feature of these cases is the way the children seemed to have been abandoned to whatever befell them when the placement came to a premature end. In Laura's case, it worked out for the best but for the other children, it was one more contribution to and unsettled and unsettling care experience. Figure 3 below shows the number of placement changes each of the sample children experienced after their matching meeting, including the matched placement.

Figure 3. Changes of placement consequent upon the matching meeting

Event	No. subsequent placement moves	**Placement 8 months after matching**
1	3	Residential school.
2	2	Independent Hostel
3	4	Children's home
4	6	Residential school.
5	1	Home
6	4	Residential School
7	0	Returned to original children's home.
8	1	Settled in continuing AFS placement

The rate of placement failure in the sample was extremely high. It was higher than the disruption rates for teenage fostering in the literature. Rowe *et al.* (1989) found that fifty-five per cent of all the teenage foster placements they studied failed to last as long as planned and forty-seven per cent failed to last as long as needed. Specialist fostering generally appears to fare better than this. Fenyo (1989) found a failure rate of thirty-eight per cent in specialist teenage fostering placements in Kent and Berridge and Cleaver (1987) recorded a thirty-two per cent breakdown rate in what they refer to as 'intermediate' term foster placements for teenagers. With one continuing placement and one that ended with discharge from care rather than disruption, the breakdown rate in the sample was one in four.

The study sample was very small and may have accidentally captured a particularly unrepresentative group of outcomes. However, the method of sampling should have avoided this. Cases for matching were selected firstly by the senior specialist practitioner responsible for the adolescent fostering scheme on the basis that they were not exceptional and secondly on the pragmatic basis of convenience for data collection. An attempt was made subsequently to verify the representativeness of the sample outcomes by comparing them with those for girls' placements in the scheme as a whole during the same year. For this purpose, the classification system used for the schemes central records was applied to the sample outcomes. This did not seem to be a very precise or consistently applied system but broadly, placements that did not continue beyond introductions or that failed shortly afterwards were classified as 'false starts'. Those which broke down subsequently and led to a further placement

having to be found for the child were recorded as either 'disruptions' or 'breakdowns'. Those recorded as 'completed' will usually have survived to the first annual review and, although they may have ended earlier than planned, the child would have returned home or moved on to some other facility such as supported accommodation. The classification of 'continuing' is self explanatory. Figure 4 below shows the statistical results of the comparison but their interpretation was problematic for reasons that will be explained.

The first column of figure 4 shows the outcomes for the sample group of placements, the second column, the outcomes for other placements made for girls during the same twelve months, and the third column aggregates the two cohorts to give an annual rate for each of the placement outcomes.

Figure 4. Placement outcomes in the sample compared with outcomes for all other placements made for girls in the AFS between mid-November 1989 and mid-November 1990

	Sample group		All Other Placements for girls		All placements for girls	
	N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
False Starts.	*3*	37.5	*3*	11	*6*	17
Breakdowns/ disruptions within six months	*3*	37.5	*12*	44	*15*	43
Total discontinued placements	*6*	**75**	*15*	**55**	*21*	**60**
Total continuing and completed placements	*2*	**25**	*12*	**44**	*14*	**40**
N =	*8*	100	*27*	100	*35*	100

The tabulations in Figure 4 show the sample placements to have been twenty per cent less likely to continue beyond six months than those made for the other girls and fifteen per cent less likely to continue than the average for the year. However, this difference may have been exaggerated by the unreliability of the official records. Evidence was found during the comparison of under-recording of unsuccessful placement outcomes in the official records. Normally, AFS placements were made for periods of at least six months and usually longer, yet there were records of placements having ended within this period without their outcome being classified at all. Also, of

such. One of the sample placements that broke down within six months remained on the official record as a continuing placement. Only the records for the sample placements could be checked this thoroughly and if mistakes were occurring here then it was likely that they were occurring elsewhere in the recording system.

With or without under-recording in the central records, the breakdown rate for placements outside the sample was as high as the highest rate in the literature. When the sample outcomes were aggregated with these, the incidence of breakdown rose to sixty per cent. There was no sense of alarm among the practitioners about this, however. When asked in interview what he thought the incidence of placement breakdown in the scheme was, a liaison worker replied "we think it's about thirty per cent or so" but this figure does not even match the recorded figure when so-called 'false starts' are excluded. The spirit of optimism in which placements were made seemed to continue on afterwards and obscure the reality of placement outcomes. The scheme appears not have kept accurate records of the pattern of placement outcomes and appears not to have consulted the inaccurate ones.

9.3. Reflections on the practice from the Practitioner perspective

The practitioners were asked to complete a short rating questionnaire prior to their first interview for the study. There were two items on the questionnaire that related to agency policy placement policy and general practice. Respondents were asked to rate, on a five-point scale from 'enthusiastically agree' to 'disagree', the level of their agreement with agency placement policy as they understood it; (*"How well do your own views accord with departmental policy on the placement of adolescents in care?")* . They were then asked to rate on a five-point scale from 'very good' to 'bad' their assessment of practice in the agency generally with regard to adolescents; (*"How would you rate general departmental practice with adolescents?").* The practice question as put did not specify placement practice but respondents were guided to interpret it this way when selecting their rating. Thus, the responses to the

two questions provided a broad overview of how the practitioners rated the placement policy and its implementation in practice. The Seekers in this analysis consisted solely of the social workers, the Providers, of the liaison worker and the Regulators, the panel chairpeople. Figure 5 below sets out the responses in the form of the number of practitioners selecting each rating in each role group (columns a-c) and as a whole (column d). The strongest tendencies in each role group (modal values) are indicated by red figure.

Figure 5. Practitioner ratings of agency policy and practice

		Number of respondents selecting each category			
Items and rating categories		a. Seekers (N=11)	b. Providers (N=5)	c. Regulators (N=6)	d. All (N=22)
	Enthusiastically agree	1	3	2	6
Accord	Agree	5	0	4	9
with	Undecided	4	2	0	6
policy	Strong reservations	1	0	0	1
	Disagree	0	0	0	0
	Very good	0	0	0	0
Assessment of	Quite good	3	3	3	9
practice	Adequate	3	1	2	6
	Inadequate	5	1	1	7
	Bad	0	0	0	0

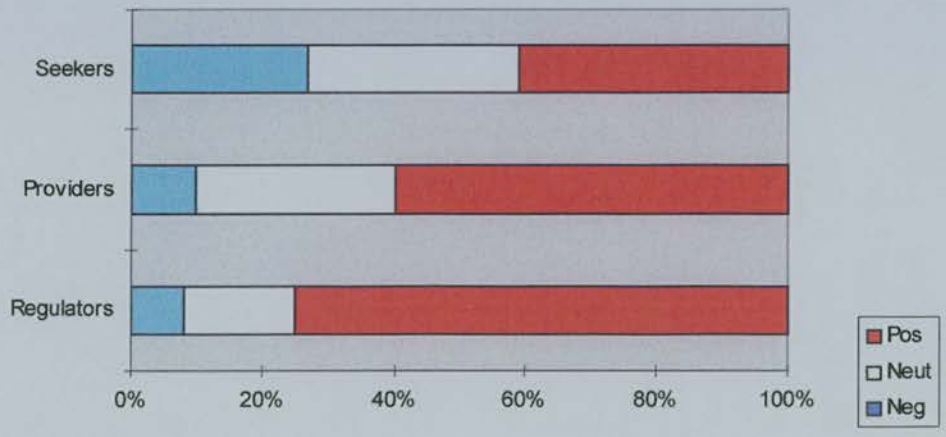
Reading down column d of figure 5, we see that the strongest tendencies in the group of practitioners as a whole were to agree with agency policy and to rate practice as quite good. The distribution of rating values across this group also shows the majority of the practitioners to be in favour of the policy (fifteen of the twenty-two agreeing or enthusiastically agreeing with it) and to find the standard of practice at least adequate (fifteen rating it as adequate or quite good). This suggests that there was a broad and positive consensus towards agency placement policy for adolescents and general satisfaction with how the policy was carried out. However, there were interesting differences between the role groups.

Comparing the ratings between role groups, a prominent proportion of the Seekers (column a) expressed diffidence about the priorities in the placement policy, with four

of the eleven indicating that they were undecided about it and one indicating strong reservations. The Providers (column b), by contrast, were predominantly enthusiastic about the policy. Providers and Regulators (column c) tended to be fairly positive about the practice where only a minority of the seekers felt that it was more than just adequate. The positive consensus was apparently weaker among the Seekers than among the other role groups. The perspective of policy and practice gained from the vantage point of seeking a resource for a particular child appeared generally to be a more negative one than that afforded those who provided or regulated placements.

The comparative dispositions of the Seekers, Providers and Regulators towards policy and practice is demonstrated more clearly in the bar charts in Figure 6. The charts were constructed by combining the ratings on both questions and banding them as positive expressions (the top two points on each scale) neutral expressions (the middle scale points) and negative expressions (the bottom two scale points). Each bar chart represents the combined responses of one of the role groups and shows the proportion of group members who selected positive (red), neutral (white) or negative (blue) ratings.

Figure 6. The comparative dispositions of Seekers, Providers and Regulators towards agency placement policy and practice



By this arrangement of the data, the Regulators emerged as the most positive group; the Providers, as more positive than not; and the Seekers, as the least positive where their appraisal of policy and practice together was concerned. The Seekers seemed to

matters and, as we saw in figure 5, it was the practice they were most worried about. The difficulties of acquiring suitable placements for the children and the problems they faced when placements disrupted may account for this. There was a resigned and even cynical tone to some of their interview responses. This was particularly marked in their comments about the system of matching and the placements they had recently acquire and, in several cases, also recently lost. This is reflected in the interview extracts set out below. The tone of the Provider and Regulator responses on these issues was significantly less critical and at times verged on the complacent. This too is reflected in the selected extracts, as are several of the main study findings.

The preferred outcome; stronger evidence is needed against it than for it

Provider	We wouldn't normally go to a matching unless we were pretty confident that a placement would result.

Provider	There shouldn't be anything startlingly new in terms of facts coming out at the matching meetings.

Regulator	The underlying pressure is that this is a good match.

Regulator	There's not a really big choice of carers so that unless there's something really, really big that we feel we should prevent it then we go ahead.

Regulator	As a worker myself, I can remember feeling just grateful to get any, no that's not fair, not anybody, but you're grateful that somebody's been linked, someone's been found because sometimes kids are waiting so long.

Most questions were put to the Seekers

Seeker	I felt a bit inadequate at the matching meeting. I had only just got the case and I hadn't had time to study it really. There were all those questions about Carole and I had to keep referring to the files, but I realise now ((after the interview for this study)) that I knew more than I thought.

Most of the talk was about the child

Social Worker	Sometimes I think I wonder what it would be like if you just placed a child with them, if they had no pre-conceived ideas of what this child is going to be like and if you just placed the child with them and they would cope as they do with other things that they don't know anything about and I wonder how big a difference that would make, because I think a lot of the time they go into placements with a lot of feed out from - but we're all different and we handle things differently and something that's going to upset one carer is not going to upset another carer so it's hard that one, I always think maybe, what would it be like if they didn't know her if they were starting from scratch with her.

Very little was discussed about the resource

Seeker	Well I think what you have to go on in situations like this is how the liaison worker sees them and the liaison worker relating experience, their past experience and how they've handled situations in the past so that's what you have to really go on plus their annual review thing and their list of various placements.

The practice did not examine the resource against the child's requirements

Seeker	I don't really think I know them terribly well and I think the worrying aspect of that is that when we discussed W- at the matching meeting and the previous carer was here and she was talking about a tight rein, W- needed a tight rein, and I think that's very difficult for new carers ... I really felt that W- did need a tight rein and still does, but I think it's how (.) you should really know how the carer is going to sort of administer that and that's something that worries me a wee bit because I really didn't know exactly how this new carer was going to do that and perhaps, you know, we discussed it through a lot but, no, I don't think you know the carers terribly well and what they're operating on is what you tell them and that's maybe a big gap as well.

When resources are scarce, matching involves compromise

Regulator	It's not easy getting resources. You can't always get the resources that you want ... you end up with a set of carers who can do a job but maybe not in the way that best meets the needs of the child, you know. That's my personal view and I don't know what you do about that. And it's the ones who are very determined who actually come forward and do it, and to be fair to them, they're tolerant of a lot of really difficult behaviours. And so it's a trade off between who's prepared to put up with these kids and our feelings about them being not quite as sophisticated as carers as our kids with special needs require.

Seeker	You are making the people fit the person really. You haven't actually chosen them out of this huge pool of people as being the perfect one for your client ... I find that a bit ludicrous really ... you're grabbing at who you can get!.

The meetings ended in optimism about the placement's prospects

Seeker	We go through all this matching and everything but you can't really predict whether it will work. I mean, you can leave a meeting on a real high because you think 'yeh, this is a really good match' and then the placement blows apart in the first weeks. I shouldn't say this, but sometimes I think we should must let the carers and the child get together and get on with it.

The process was not child centred

Regulator	We've been searching for ways to attract people into substitute care and that's right in some senses but we've done it around (.) It's worked a little bit around procedures, processes for admission to the scheme from the client end. I don't like to put things into commercial terms (.) but our product is the child in the sense that that's our main purpose and our machinery and plant are the carers. It's worked a little bit towards the carers' needs rather than the child's and it's left the children having to go through that system.

Chapter 10

STUDY CONCLUSIONS

10.1 Introduction

When the decision is made that a child needs to be provided with extended care outside his or her family, the next crucial decision is where and with whom the child will live in order that his or her ongoing needs can be met appropriately. The study has examined a key stage in the process of making that decision, known as placement 'matching', as it occurred in one specialist adolescent fostering scheme.

In approaching its topic, the study found itself confronting an area of practice surrounded by paradox and contradiction. Placement matching in specialist adolescent foster care was deemed by its exponents to be a crucial element in the process of making successful placements yet it lacked both an agreed theoretical framework and a sound empirical base. In the study setting, the meetings where formal matching took placement were similarly accorded a high status. Considerable resources of time and staff were committed to them with the declared aspiration of making the best choice of placement in the child's welfare interests and the intention of providing independent oversight of the quality of placements made. Yet, the practice was unsupported by official guidance, standards or criteria to which its practitioners could refer and the agency's expectations of the practice over and above the general aims was nowhere made explicit. Finally, selecting and matching a placement for an individual child implies a measure of choice between more and less suitable placement resources relative to that individual child's requirements and the capacity to reject resources found not to meet those requirements. Yet resources for teenage fostering have rarely if ever been so plentiful that choice would be wholly unconstrained by the need ration them in some way. In the setting, resources were rationed to the extent that matching meetings considered only one child and one resource.

The meetings nevertheless almost invariably concluded that they were 'matched'. The study sought to understand what 'matching' actually meant in this complex context by examining the context further and then analysing the practice of matching as it took place in the formal matching meetings.

While much was unknown about the practice of matching when the study began, in the setting it was clearly a predominantly oral activity and this provided the key to analysis of it. Certain practitioners with a particular relationship to the child, the resource and the responsibilities of the agency met for a specific amount of time at a particular stage in the process of making placements and talked with each other. From this talk a decision to recommend a prospective placement eventuated. The method of analysis focused on the talk, examining in detail what was said and how in the course of reaching a decision in order to draw out the structure, content and priorities of the practice. The findings were then compared with a theoretical model of matching drawn from child care literature broadly contemporary with the practice. The model was framed to deal with the realities of resource scarcity and provided a normative definition of matching as a process of assessing whether or verifying that, with appropriate supports and supplements, a particular resource would meet the requirements of a particular child in the round. It embodied the principles of decision making in the child's interests and integrated into this considerations that research had shown to be important to positive placement outcomes. The model thus represented standards of best practice that the sample practitioners could (if not should) have been familiar with and which could (if not should) have been evident in their practice.

The practitioners involved in the study were a confident and experienced group. The sample cases appeared to be well within the normal range for the setting and the processes they were put through were routine. The decisions of the sample matching meetings were also consistent with the generality of matching decisions. In all these

respects, the study appeared to have sampled normal practice. The findings of the study can thus be taken to reflect general practice in the setting . They may also reflect practice in similar schemes elsewhere where decisions are taken by committee as to which scarce placement resource is to be allocated to which waiting child.

The questions the study addressed in relation to the nature of the practice were not entirely open-ended. The comparison with the model added an evaluative element and behind this evaluation lay a suspicion that, given the context of the practice, an unambiguous focus on the needs and interests of the child would be very difficult for the practitioners to maintain. So it proved to be.

Data analysis was conducted in waves across the data, the findings of each wave informing the focus of the next. The key findings of each wave of analysis are discussed in section 10. 2 of the chapter. Implications of the findings for practice and policy are discussed in section 10.3 and the study methodology in reviewed in section 10.4 where suggestions for further research are also made.

10.2 Summary of The Findings

The study began with an examination of the context by reference to historical and current documents and the organisational structure of the Adolescent Fostering Scheme and its matching meetings.

Matching was found to have initially been resource-led in the sense that referrals were selected to fit with available resources not the other way about. Practice changed with the introduction of Fostering Panels in the agency. The organisation of the adolescent scheme was brought into line with other fostering schemes and placement matching for adolescents became the responsibility of formal meetings presided over by an independent

panel of Fostering Panel members. The object was to fulfil the agency's responsibility for ensuring that placements meeting the children's needs. Matching meetings took place after a resource had been provisionally allocated by the scheme officials and after the prospective carers had agreed in principal to the prospective placement. It followed from this that matching practice could not be about selecting an appropriate resource for the child but was rather a process of evaluation or verification of the appropriateness of a selection that had already been made.

In addition to the matching panel of three, those involved in this process of evaluation or verification included the prospective carers and their liaison worker, the referred child's social worker and her current carer. According to a convention that seemed not to have been reviewed when Fostering Panel's assumed responsibility for matching, the child and parents were kept at arms length from the process until the placement was confirmed. One reason given for this was to free the decision making at the meeting from the risk of offending or disappointing the family. Given that the carers were actively involved in matching meetings the question arose as to whether it would be constrained by an equivalent fear regarding their feelings.

The agency actively promoted foster care as the placement of choice but appeared to have given little consideration to the impact of this policy on the demand for placement resources. As a result, its care system was in a state of crisis at the time of the study with a desperate shortage of foster carers and over-flowing residential units unable to provide a satisfactory quality of care. The pressure on social workers to seek foster placements for the children and the difficulty of doing so may have tempted them to compromise on the appropriateness of the resource they were able to acquire. Certainly, Rowe *et al.* (1989) had found the social workers in their sample to be in this position.

The role of the independent panel in the matching process was conceived in the study to

be crucial to mitigating the pressure to compromise on the child's needs. They were theoretically in a position to take a detached stance on the child's needs, the properties of the resource and the degree of compatibility between them. In practice, however, they would be mindful of the fact that the provision of foster care resources was precarious and depended, among other things, on maintaining the goodwill of the carers who in many respects were the resource. They may also have been mindful of the fact that, potentially, the providers of a scarce resource were in a stronger position to set terms on access to it than the seekers of the resource were to set terms on what it should provide.

The central issue pursued throughout the remainder of the study was the kind of matching practice that eventuated from within this complex of ideological and practical tensions in its agency context, and above all, where the child's placement needs and requirements fitted into it.

The focus of analysis progressed to an examination of the structure and content of the discussion texts that comprised the practice. Sequences of discussion that showed consistent features across the texts were classified as phases and their sequence, form and function were studied. A profile of the overall substantive content of discussions was generated by reference to the range and incidence of the user-related, resource-related and planning-related topics raised. The structure was then compared with the structure of the theoretical model to evaluate the extent to which it appeared to meet the necessary conditions for child-centred decision making that the model represented.

The practice was found to be deficient in these necessary conditions in five key respects. Firstly, as a consequence of its rule of spontaneity, the progress of discussion was unsystematic and without periodic summaries to clarify where decision making had reached and what issues in respect of the proposed placement had been identified. Secondly, phases of discussion focusing on the child did conclude with a clarification of

of her placement requirements. Thirdly, there was no phase of discussion which recognisably concerned itself with examining the properties of the resource in relation to the child's requirements. Typically, the level of discussion about the resource was very low as signified by the small range and low incidence of resource-related topics across the sample. However, there were two phases in which carers' questions and anxieties were discussed. Fifthly, planning for the future security and effectiveness of the proposed placement and for the protection of the child in the event that the placement failed was not an evident component of any phase. This was as true for the final phase, which consisted largely of participant summaries, as it was for all the preceding phases and planning topics showed the lowest range and incidence across the sample.

In addition to the rule of spontaneity, the practice was also found to be operating on rules of whole group consensus and the pursuit of a preferred outcome. That is, they embarked on their matching discussion with a clear expectation that a recommendation to proceed with the proposed placement would result, uncontentiously, from it. There was therefore no real incentive for them to probe for contrary evidence or pursue lines of enquiry that might find it. In the course of discussion, the practitioners talked extensively about the child, little about the resource an less about forward planning.

Following the issues raised by the structural findings, a close examination was made of how the practitioners addressed the topics they raised in discussion and the salience they gave to particular issues. The structural analysis had found little evidence of child-centred practice. The question addressed by this further wave of analysis was whether, at the level of their individual exchanges with each other, the practitioners could be seen to be focusing on meeting the child's placement requirements in all important respects. The model agenda of discussion provided a set of standards with which to frame the analysis.

Again, the findings were rather negative. Detailed discussion of the background to the

referral was curtailed by an implicit rule that matching practitioners should not question its basis. Placement objectives were not made explicit and placement terms were left indeterminately defined. On the issue of maintaining and enhancing the child's important relationships from the placement, the focus of discussion was narrowly trained on the immediate management of home visits to the exclusion of other forms of contact, wider relationships, and the opportunity to help the child improve relationships that had turned sour. There was some evidence of sensitivity to the risk of prior placement instability possibly affecting the new placement but the issue remained at that level rather than being translated into strategies for mitigating the risk.

There was little evidence that the practice treated each child as an individual. There was a tendency to problematise and stereotype the children and to focus on their general neediness rather than their specific needs. The resources were similarly confronted as a generic phenomenon whose particularities were seldom discussed and whose suitability for the child concerned was largely assumed. The child's particular behavioural, emotional, educational, health and developmental needs received scant attention beyond establishing whether the behaviour was likely to be a problem in the placement or the school placement needed to be changed to fit with the placement.

Overall, the decision making appeared to be very set in the 'here and now'; the problems of the present and the urgent need for the new placement. The decision to proceed with the placement appeared to be based on emotion more than evidence. The image of the child was problematised, the image of the foster family idealised and the prospects for the placement viewed with an optimism qualified only by the fear that the child may not accept the chance she was being given. Planning or any form of forward thinking beyond the introductory phase of a placement was very weak and issues were raised but not resolved. The manner in which the discussions were brought to a close suggested that the practitioners expected no more of the practice than this.

Moving from the content to the manner of decision making in the practice, the study examined the performance of the decision makers in their roles as Seekers, Providers and Regulators of the placements. The method focused on the pattern of each group's utterances in terms of questioning, answering and commenting and studied the impact of these patterns on the general quality of the decision making.

The Regulators, in the form of the matching panel, were seen to have the greatest influence on the decision making through their command of the questioning and commenting that took place. By this means, they were able to exert superior control over the topics that were raised and pursued, and over the inferences that were then drawn. The Regulators can therefore be seen to have been most responsible for the quality of decision making that eventuated and, in this respect, they appeared to be failing in their duty to ensure that the decision making centred on the child's placement interests.

The Providers were the carers and their liaison worker. Whether for reasons of etiquette or fear of losing their goodwill, the Providers were given a rather protected position in the decision making. They were rarely asked questions and when they were, the questions were undemanding and open-ended. They listened more than they spoke and thereby had the freedom that Seekers did not have to privately assimilate and appraise what they heard. What heard most about was the child.

The recipients of the Regulators' enquiries in most instances were the Seekers, that is the social worker and current carer, whose contributions to the decision making largely took the form of supplying information to it. They had few opportunities to ask questions of the Providers and, given that the Regulators chose not to, the input of information about the resource into the decision making was small. Their influence over the decision making appeared to the weakest of all three role groups and their capacity to represent the child's

needs and interests was correspondingly limited.

The findings on role performance together with those on the structure and substance of the decision making suggested that the panel system of matching was performing in a way contrary to the child's interests and therefore contrary to the aspiration of child-centredness in the decision making.

The examination of the data concluded with a reflective look at the practice from the vantage point of placement outcomes and some views from the practitioners. The data in this instances were from the follow-up interviews with the practitioners. The majority of placement in the sample failed to continue as planned and half of them broke down in crisis with very negative consequences for the children concerned. It was difficult to tell how characteristic this was of scheme placements in general because the central records were found to be unreliable on placement outcomes. There was some evidence of under-recording and of under-estimation of the real scale of placement failure.

The degree of satisfaction with policy and practice on placement making for adolescents was broadly positive across all practitioners but diverged between role groups. The Regulators (chairpeople, in this instance) were the most positive about policy and practice, the Seekers (the social workers) the least, and it was the practice that they were most circumspect about. Given that Seekers have the least influence in the choice of resource and have to deal with the consequences of placement failure, their feelings about the practice are understandable.

Overall, the findings tell a story of a failing practice to which considerable resources of staff and time were devoted for poor outcomes. The practice had evident commitment, from those not actually seeking placements at least, and belief in the value of the placements they were making was very strong. However, the practice lacked a clear

theoretical framework to underpin its procedures. For all its status and organisational architecture, it was ultimately ad hoc. The background papers were weak, there were no records of discussions that had already taken place on the prospective placement, and a rule of spontaneity allowed discussion to roll on in a 'stream of consciousness' manner, without pinning issues and proposals down. The panel system provided effective oversight in the sense of controlling the course of the discussion and argument but ineffective in protecting the child's interests. The child was described and talked about extensively but it was not apparently for the purpose of ensuring that her needs as an individual would be met in the placement. As a consequence of an idealised view of foster families, the qualities in each resource were taken for granted. Providers were not asked to describe or discuss them. At the same time, the response to carers' anxieties was merely reassurance. Making plans and agreeing strategies with them was not part of the process. Neither, it appeared was being clear about objectives and expectations. Resources were scarce and everyone in the setting was aware of it but an elaborate matching ritual was played out to its conclusion as if it were immune.

10.3 Implications of the Findings for Current Policy and Practice

Practice in the setting at the time of the study appears to have fallen far short of its aspirations but then, they were aspirations unsupported by good information systems, clear criteria and goals, and explicit guidance on what was expected of the practice and how these expectations might be met. Circumstances have changed considerably since the data for the study was collected. Placement matching meetings have largely been replaced in the agency by other procedures that have been put into place as a result of national initiatives and local pressures. To some extent these were anticipated at the outset of the study for its timing coincided with implementation of the 1989 Children Act in England and Wales and preparations for enactment of similar legislation in Scotland, where the study took place. The Children (Scotland) Act was enacted in 1995 and implementation

began two years later. The legislation followed considerable and widespread public concern over the quality of care for children placed away from home. Successive enquiry reports had exposed the poor state of residential care and concerted attention was given as a result to setting and meeting higher standards in the sector (viz. Skinner, 1992; Kent, 1997). In the wake of this, attention was focused on the foster care sector that became subject to inspection for the first time under the new legislation. Problems of poor assessment of children's needs, obscure decision making, scarce resources, and inadequate monitoring were found to be leaving children exposed to inappropriate placement, multiple placement moves and placement breakdown (Utting, 1997). Again, the exposure of the problems led to the committal of resources specifically to raise standards and safeguard the interests of children cared for away from home. The Quality Protects programme, for example, was initiated by central government to raise standards of foster care provision and monitoring and introduced for the first time the requirement that local authorities monitor patterns of placement change and breakdown. The programme has, as yet no precise equivalent in Scotland).

The legislation itself set new standards for practice in the child care system. In addition to introducing independent inspection of provision, it also introduced specific requirements of the process of admitting to, maintaining in and preparing children for leaving public care. Among the new provisions was the requirement that the child's welfare be the paramount concern in all decisions concerning him or her, that children and parents be consulted when decisions were made about the child's welfare and that their views be taken into account in the decision making, and that the child's needs in relation to religion, race, culture and language always be considered. The legislation encouraged partnership working between agencies and with the family and introduced regulations requiring written care plans and placement agreements. The term 'looked after' replaced 'in care', presumably because it was held to be more in keeping with the spirit of the statutes to provide care equivalent to that of a 'good parent'.

To accompany the new legislation, a research and development project was initiated by the Department of Health to devise and field test methods of recording which would, at the same time, enhance the quality of decision making in respect of children looked after away from home (Parker, 1991). The focus of the Looking After Children (LAC) project was accountability of process and outcomes and has a direct bearing on the findings of this study. The research on which the theoretical model for the study was a central component of the literature informing the work of the LAC project and some of the problems the project sought to correct are mirrored in this study's findings. Specifically, these are the fragility of foster care placements, educational and health disadvantages for children in care, lack of skilled intervention strategies for children's behavioural, emotional and developmental problems, lack of focus and purpose in care interventions, poorly informed assessment and decision making, and inadequate recording on individual cases and for the purposes of monitoring outcomes (Ward, 1966).

The recording instruments developed by the LAC project were subsequently adopted as the national recording system for England and Wales and, in slightly amended form, are in the process of being similarly adopted in Scotland. Bundled under the evocative title of 'Looking After Children; good parenting, good outcomes', they comprise of a comprehensive series of templates that the child, parents, carers, social worker and ideally other professionals working with the child are involved in completing. The process of completion follows the progress of the child from admission to leaving care. It charts all significant changes of need and circumstance, significant actions taken on the child's behalf, the placements and changes of placement and the objectives and intended outcomes of the process. If the records are used as intended, every child who becomes looked after will have appropriate personal details in a record that accompanies him or her to each placement. Each placement will have objectives recorded in the care plan, a placement agreement setting out its terms and a record of the 'day to day placement

arrangements'. This latter is very comprehensive and requires the precise arrangements to be specified for several aspects of the child's life including contact with people who are important to the child, social presentation, emotional and behavioural development and leisure activities. The role of the child's parents in these arrangements in required to be specified and the views of the child recorded with them. The information required to complete the Looking After Children (LAC) instruments is important in itself. Equally important, however, is the process of compiling and recording it. The very fact of having to complete the assessment and actions records, the care plan, the placement agreement and the day to day arrangements records should ensure that a placement is made on the basis of the child's needs as a rounded, developing individual. This will correct a major short-coming found in the matching practice studied.

Another important component of the LAC record system is a formal review of the quality care provided in a placement. The LAC project team found that, contrary to expectation, foster carers did not find this intrusive or undermining; "they generally found that the experience increased their sense of professionalism" (Ward 1996 *Ibid*: 246). One of the findings in relation to the performance of the practitioners examined in this study was the tendency to protect carers against scrutiny of their provision. The experience of the LAC project suggests that this was entirely unnecessary and possibly even counterproductive.

There have been criticisms of the LAC system that it is time consuming, bureaucratic and that it infringes professional authority and discretion (Knight and Caveney, 1998; Bell,1998; Garrett,1999). The system is unquestionably time consuming but whether it is time-wasting would depend on how it is used. If it is used only to archive information or demonstrate compliance with form-filling then it will have defeated its purpose. The fear about infringement of professional discretion seems misplaced. It is precisely because professional discretion was not serving the interests of children as well as it might that the system was developed. The practice that this study has examined developed in the

absence of explicit criteria, objectives and guidance and the consequences for decision making were seen in its misdirection.

At the time of data collection for the study, matching meetings were the gateway to a planned foster placement for adolescents. Since implementation of the 1995 Children (Scotland) Act, matching meetings in the agency have become discretionary and largely replaced by reviews and placement agreement meetings. Resources are still initially allocated by resource specialists but they work much more closely with referring social workers. The gateway to a placement may have changed but some of the same issues pertain. Resources are still scarce and the demand for them still exceeds their supply. There remains, therefore, the need for extreme vigilance in selecting placements and giving them the best chance of success by careful planning and whatever supports the child's needs and the placement require.

The new legislation sets clear grounds for admission of children to care and to some extent raised the threshold for admission. There is a corresponding and growing emphasis in social policy on supporting struggling families so that all but the most challenging children can be cared for at home. The implications for the care system are clear. Family placements will become more difficult to sustain. The quality of the relationship between the care agency and its foster carers will become increasingly important if it is to recruit and retain this vital resource. The problems of resource supply, shortage and retention and the delicacy of the agency-carer relationship were themes running throughout the study of placement matching. It is probable that they exerted an undue influence on the decision making and there was evidence of both complacency and cynicism among the practitioners interviewed. As the same time, the quality of decision making was such that carers were being asked to accept so-called 'planned' placements of difficult children without being given any guidance or a clear notion of the support they could expect. Among the reasons given in a recent study for carers leaving the

service was the child's care and control needs being more demanding that expected and the unresponsiveness to requests for help and support in crisis, particularly with strategies to deal with the problems (Triseliotis *et al.,* 1998). Even carers who remained in the service echoed these sentiments. The present study detected a strong measure of idealisation of foster families in the placement matching practice. This is clearly unhelpful for it ignores the very real issues involved in addressing the behavioural and emotional problems of someone else's child. It is also quite unreasonable to expect carers to be able to handle complex behavioural problems just because they are carers. Practical support is always necessary in these circumstances and is likely to become more so.

The new legislation is still bedding down in Scotland. The Scottish version of the LAC system has been piloted and has been generally well received (Wheelaghan *et al.,*1999). When fully implemented, it should bring about significant improvement in the quality of placement making. The study findings provide a benchmark against which such improvement could be measured.

10.5 Review of the Methodology and Suggestions for further research.

The methodology used in the study was redesigned within the study to address a problematic arising from the data. Specifically, the methodology was required to deconstruct the anatomy of meetings where decision were being made so that the nature of the decision making could be understood. Recourse was made to socio-linguistic theories pertaining to social discourse, inter-active talk and their particular manifestations in institutional contexts where they are adapted to the pursuit of institutional goals. From these theories, analytic tools were devised to process the data at hand.

The choice of a socio-linguistic approach was made for two reasons, the first being the nature of the data as transcribed talk. The study centred on the formal stage of placement matching which was accomplished by a certain group of people talking to each other and

coming to a common view by which the course of subsequent actions was determined. Talk of any kind conforms to certain fundamental rules that give rise to stable characteristics in it. Working forward from an understanding of the stable characteristics of talk in general and talk in pursuit of institutional objectives in particular, it was possible then to examine the nature of the talk peculiar to the study setting.

The second reason for a socio-linguistic method of analysis lay in its capacity to distance the researcher from over-familiar data. The professional and situational links between researcher and subjects was such that too many shared assumptions about their common area of practice were going unquestioned and this obscured the phenomena under study. The method focused on the utterances actually made by speakers as they formed their decisions. Converted into written texts, these then became accessible to repeated reading and scrutiny and amenable to analysis of their structure, content and interactional formation. The process of classifying the data according to linguistic rules isolated it to some extent from the shared meanings and understandings of observer and actor and allowed the practice to be looked on more objectively.

A method that treats actors' speech as separate from their non-verbal behaviour and distinctive personalities is clearly a partial one and it could be argued that it ignores phenomena important to the interactive process of communication. In general, this would be true but the predominant issue for the study was not the communication as such. It was the nature of the activity constituted by the communication, an activity whose given purpose was the making of a decision that had vested power and legitimacy to cause other activities and decisions to follow. Furthermore, it was an activity designed to make decision making accountable and to ensure practice of a certain standard. The only way to firmly grasp its achievements in these respects was to examine its tangible substance, the utterances by one speaker that could be heard and responded to by another and witnessed straightforwardly by an observer. What mattered was not what speakers may

have intended by their words but what they actually conveyed.

The issue of the standard to which the practice was ostensibly striving and that it was actually meeting became a second problematic for the study to address. The context of the practice and the data derived directly from it gave rise to questions about the capacity of the practice as constituted to realise its ostensibly goal, namely a decision in the child's interests. In the absence of normative protocols for placement matching provided either in the setting or in the literature, the study created its own in the form of a theoretical model of matching. The substance of the model was drawn from research findings and practice recommendations extant at the time of the practice studied and exemplified a set of optimum of conditions for child-centred decision making in the selection and implementation of foster placements for teenagers. The model thus represented both a process for and quality of decision making against which the actuality of the practice could be reasonably be compared.

In addition to its purpose to explore certain social phenomena, the strategy developed for data analysis was itself exploratory in that it comprised a novel combination of techniques whose efficacy was tested in their application to the data. The sample of discursive events to which the techniques were applied was small but the process of analysis was nevertheless difficult and labour intensive, not least because of its novelty. In this particular application of it, the labour of analysis was disproportionate to the generalisability of its findings. However, the findings could not have been generated without the particular analytic devices used because they made the data accessible, manageable, meaningful and amenable to comparison with the model standard. The method was found to work on the small sample and could equally well be applied to a much larger sample, particularly if computer technology were employed in data processing.

They are other ways in which the value of the study method could be extended. The aim of the study was to explicate and to some extent evaluate an explicit form of decision making that occurred in a specific time and place. In reality, decisions within institutions are not this discretely formed. They are, as Boden (1994) has pointed out, made in fragments in an incremental fashion, in different locations, over sometimes protracted periods of time and by means that are not always visible. In this paradigm, the decision making of a matching meeting must be seen as part of process that had begun and would continue elsewhere. Some of the decision-making events to have a direct bearing of what took place at a matching meeting and what followed its recommendation were explicit and set into a deliberate sequence by the agency. The decision to proceed with a referral was made at one meeting, the decision about which of the available resources would be linked with it at another meeting, and the decision to proceed to matching at yet another. Once a matching meeting had agreed that a placement should proceed, introductions to the placement would take place where those involved would make further judgements and after three months or so a meeting would be held to formalise a contract for the placement. At each stage different kinds and qualities of information would be shared, assessed and interpreted and whatever conclusions was drawn would dictate what happened next. The focus of the study on the matching meetings alone was largely pragmatic. It was the enigmatic nature of these meetings that called into question a strategy that had already proceeded to the point where data collection was almost complete and provoked the design of new one for data analysis. Had the nature of the meetings been the object of study from the outset, then a broader range of decision making sites could have been included in data collection to give a more rounded view on the activity of matching. Similarly, the follow-up interviews that had been given a quite different purpose in this study could have been used to reflect with the practitioners on the practice in which they had been involved at each of these sites. Hunter, McKeganey, and MacPherson (1988) used such an approach very productively in their study of decision making with respect to services for the elderly. They combined practice

observation at various sites in five different agencies and interviews with the practitioners and clients involved. By this means they were able to study the formation of a decision to provide or not to provide a service at several stages in its formation. By triangulating the findings, they built up "a composite picture of what each person took to be the salient features of that decision" (McKegany, MacPherson and Hunter, 1988: p.16).

The methodology for the present study employed waves of analysis across the same data, that is, verbatim transcripts of the meetings, to identify different and different types of characteristics typical of it. The process of reaching the decision was examined as a sequence of phases, as the constitution of priority concerns, and as the product of division of interlocutory labour between the participants. The analytic waves progressively revealed the underlying rationale of the decision making, its narrative 'plot' so to speak. In view of what has been said about the incremental and fragmentary nature of decision making, the narrative constituted in the matching meetings is equivalent to one single episode of a serialised drama. The story went on after they had ended, new characters came and went, the plot thickened and took new turns and the drama came to a conclusion some time in the future. The scope of the study has allowed only part of the story to emerge with only a glance at its denouement in the form of the outcomes of the placements the meetings decided upon.

Hall's (1997) study confronts social work as narrative directly and in doing so suggests further possibilities for the application of the text based analysis in researching social work. Hall's point of departure in researching the linguistic performance of social workers is to conceive of social work as the production and consumption of locally produced narratives constituted through time in the verbal and written texts of everyday social work. His focus is case-work and the conversations, interviews, meetings, assessments, reports, letters, memos and case file entries of which it comprises in practical terms. To the repertoire of linguistic sources used in this study of placement

matching, Hall's method adds those of literary criticism. The concept of the 'audience' or 'reader', for example, incorporates the intended consumption of a narrative within the inter-active performance of a text. The question as to who it is the rhetoric is intended to persuade then become a significant part of the analytic project. Similarly, the concept of 'voice' directs to the question of the community of reference a speaker/writer is invoking, for legitimacy or other purposes, in the use of words such as 'we' and 'they'. The method has a number of advantages over the method used in the present study. It allows the charting of the speaker/writer's position as the story unfolds, it pulls together a wide range of facts, opinions, characters and events, it enables written and spoken texts to be compared and narrative is at the same time an everyday and analytic concept, enabling mundane and theoretical concepts to be linked together" (Hall, *Ibid*: p.237)

Text based analysis moves the researcher from the inevitably hesitant task of inferring the meaning behind utterances and documents to the more verifiable task of what they convey. It moves the focus from rationalist and rationalising conceptions of social work performance as 'assessment', 'care planning', 'counselling' and so forth to the actual performance of the social worker (or manager, policy maker and planner, for that matter) in the interactive and negotiated context of everyday practice. A combination of multi-site data collection, sequential analysis of the unfolding narrative and structural analysis of key decision making events would provide a very powerful strategy for investigating the nature, quality and effectiveness social work practice in all its forms.

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TALKING A GOOD MATCH:

A CASE STUDY OF PLACEMENT MATCHING IN A SPECIALIST ADOLESCENT FOSTER CARE SCHEME

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A. THE THEORETICAL MODEL OF MATCHING

Chairperson introduces purpose and process of meeting; specifies any particular issues to be addressed; ensures that contributions are focused and based on evidence not assumption; ensures issues are dealt with systematically.
A minute of the meeting is kept.

Item 1. Child's family background, reasons for and objectives of placement

- accurate details of family background and circumstances provided, reasons for placement given and general placement objectives made explicit
- general resource strengths and weaknesses assessed in relation to objectives and potential risk factors noted (*e.g. inexperienced carers, sophisticated objectives*)
- should resource be rejected or can arrangements be made to strengthen resource in relation to objectives, weaknesses and potential risks **?**

Item 2. Maintaining and enhancing the child's important relationships

- child's significant personal relationships identified
- arrangements required for contact and continuation clarified
- resource strengths and weaknesses assessed in relation to maintaining and enhancing child's significant personal relationships and potential risk factors noted (*eg. carer ambivalence, physical obstacles to continuation of relationships*)
- can arrangements made to strengthen placement in respect of maintaining and enhancing these relationships?

Item 3. Child's care history and its implications for future placement

- accurate details of child's care career provided and implications for future placement noted
- resource strengths and weaknesses assessed and risk factors noted (*eg. several prior placement moves, previous placement breakdowns, more than five years in care*)
- should resource be rejected or can arrangements be made to strengthen placement, particularly in times of crisis?

Item 4. Child's individual needs and strengths and related requirements of the placement

- individual needs arising from child's unique background, personality, aptitude and aspirations
- resource strengths and weaknesses assessed in relation to these and risk factors noted (eg. *some important needs or strengths not catered for in resource*)
- should resource be rejected or can arrangements be made to strengthen placement's capacity to meet the needs and develop the strengths?

Item 5. Addressing specific behavioural and emotional problems

- circumstances and possible causes of any behavioural or emotional problems examined
- measures required to ameliorate problems which continue or emerge later in placement
- strengths and weaknesses of resource in relation to required measures examined and risk factors noted (*eg. inexperienced carers*)
- should resource be rejected or can arrangements made to ensure measures can be carried out appropriately?

Item 6. Promoting the child's educational continuity and attainment

- accurate information on child's educational history and attainment provided and any special needs noted
- strengths and weaknesses of resource examined in relation to educational continuity, attainment and any special needs to be met, and risk factors noted (*eg. disrupted education, poor attainment)*
- should resource be rejected or can arrangements be made to strengthen its capacity to address educational needs?

Item 7. Promoting child's health and personal development

- accurate information on child's health and developmental history provided and any special needs noted
- strengths and weaknesses of resource examined in relation to routine health care, meeting any additional health needs, promoting child's development and risk factors noted (*eg. health history not clear, previously unmet health needs*)
- should resource be rejected of can arrangements be made to strengthen the placement in respect of child's health and development?

Item 8. Views of the parties to the placement

- views and preferences of the child and family are established
- views and preferences of the prospective carers are established
- the implications of over-riding any of these views and preferences are fully considered
- should resource be rejected or can arrangements be made to accommodate the views and preferences

Item 9 Summary and Contingency planning

- recapitulation of main points of discussion and appraisal of resource potential
- recapitulation of arrangements necessary to strengthen proposed placement and
- Should resource be rejected?
- If not, allocation of responsibilities for ensuring identified arrangements to enhance placement are put in place
- Contingency plan in event that placement fails and allocation of responsibilities

Chairperson summarises the decision and placement plan and closes the meeting.

APPENDIX B1. NOTE-TAKING AIDES FOR FORMAL OBSERVATIONS

A proforma similar to that below (i.e. with more space for notes) was used in each observation to assist process note-taking and subsequent analysis.

Case code:			**Date:**	**Tape number:**
Location:			Time star:	Time finish:
Roles/ Persons present: 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. etc			Seating plan:	
General tone of discussion (e.g. formal/informal/; sober/ convivial; consensusal,/adversarial; relaxed/tense; etc.);				
Speaker	Spoken to	Counter No.	Topic	Analytic point (e.g. consensus/ dissent; assumption/ evidence; practice issue?; interview issue?)
Issues for interview A				
Issues for interview B				

An initial analytic topic list, as shown below, was prepared to assist in mapping the discussion in process.

General	Adolescence	Community	Socialisation	Fostering
	Development	Nurturing	Theory	Policy
	Normalisation	Control/ limit setting	Objectives	Practice norms
	Familialism	Mothering	Care plan	Other resources
Child	Personality	Needs	Appearance	Relationships (family)
	Behaviour	Problems	Development	Relationships (peer)
	Lifestyle	Abilities/ strengths	Control/ care	Objectives for
	Attitude to placement	Care problems/ risks		
Family	Composition	Emotional resources	Needs/ problems	Objectives for
	Material circs.	Lifestyle	Strengths	Attitude to placement
Mother/	Personality	Needs	Abilities/ strengths	Objectives for
Father	Behaviour	Problems	Appearance	Attitude to placement
	Lifestyle			
Resource	Family composition	Educational assets	Behaviour	Location and local facilities
	Material circs.	Lifestyle	Appearance (family and home)	Particular abilities/ skills of carers
	Emotional assets	Character (family members)	Interests (of family members	Limitations
	Social assets	Experience		Support to placement

APPENDIX B2. PRACTITIONER INTERVIEW SCHEDULES

The following sets of questions were used in semi-structured interviews with practitioners after the matching meeting in which they had been involved. The phrase 'this child' was replaced by the name of the child in question.

Schedule For First Semi-structured Interviews With Placing Social Workers

Part 1. The case

Child & family/ needs

1. How long have you worked with this child? - with whole family first?- or was the child referred first?
2. What was [were] the presenting problem[s]? - what was she doing/ how behaving? - who was she upsetting? - who was upsetting her?
3. What other problems emerged in your assessment of the case? - how were these recognised? - relationships with other family members? relationships with peers? - material circumstances/structural problems
4. What sort of relationship do you feel you have/how do you find working with this child? - areas of difficulty? - areas of success?
5. How would you define this child's needs? - probe for definitions, examples. Are these familiar/ unusual for girls in care?
6. Explore definitions and concepts.
7. What do you feel are this child's strengths and weaknesses? - probe for examples.
8. What are your greatest anxieties in respect of this child?
9. Why do you say that...what do you mean by ...?
10. How is your relationship/ do you find working with the child's family? - areas of difficulty - areas of success?
11. What do you feel are the strengths and weaknesses in her family? - material/structural problems; dynamics, etc. - probe for examples.
12. What are your greatest anxieties about the family as a whole?
13. Why do you say that...what do you mean by...?

Care plan

14. What are your long-term plans for this child?
15. Why this strategy...what are targets for change?
16. What is your expectation of success with this care plan?
17. Why do you say that...what do you mean by ...?

Choice of placement type

18. What made you decide that a foster placement is the best intervention for this child?
19. Why do you say that...what do you mean by...?
20. What other resources did you consider? Why did you decide against them?
21. Were you able to try any preventative measures before admission to care? - if not, why not?- if so, what, and why did this fail?

Resource & match

21. Do you feel that you know the carers well? -as well as birth family?
22. What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of this carer family? -what makes them particularly suitable as specialist adolescent carers?
23. Explore definitions and concepts - check re. significance of material/structural circumstances.
24. What do you think are the most important features of this placement for this child/how do you see it meeting her needs?
25. Why do you say that ...what do you mean by.....?
26. What do you feel are the weaknesses of this placement, if any?
27. Why do you say that...What do you mean by.....?
28. What do you think the carers will be able to give this child that her own parent[s] cannot at the moment.?

29. Why do you say that...What do you mean by..... ?
    - probe for definitions of role of carer Mum, Dad, Sibs, lifestyle, material circumstances, as well as emotional ingredients
30. Do you see the child's needs changing while she is in her placement?
31. Why do you say that...What do you mean by.....?
32. What changes in any aspect of his case would allow you to recommend and return home, and when do you think she will return?
33. Why do you say that... What do you mean by.....?
34. How confident do you feel about the match between the child and the carers?
35. Why do you say that...what do you mean by...?
36. Can you visualise this child's future - how does it look to you?
37. Why do you say that...What do you mean by....?

Additional work in care plan

38. What work do you intend to do with her family while she is in care? - probe for details, examples, objectives - targets for change - which family members will be involved?
39. What is your expectation of success in this work?
40. Why do you say that...what do you mean by ...?
41. Are there other things you will be doing as part of the care plan? - probe for details and objectives?

Placement and birth family

42. How have the girl's parent[s] responded to the placement?
43. Do you envisage any difficulties arising between family and carers?
44. Why do you say that...what do you mean by ...?

Schedule for Semi-structured Interview with Matching Panel Chairpersons and Liaison Workers. Variation in phrasing of question for liaison workers is shown in parenthesis

Part 1. Case.

Child & family.

1. How familiar were you with this case prior to matching?
2. What do you understand to be the child's problems and needs - received assessment from SW and own assess. - relationships with family members and peers - material circumstances.?
3. Explore definitions and concepts - Unique or common problems/needs?
4. What do you feel are this child's strengths and weaknesses? - probe for examples.
5. What are your greatest anxieties about this child
6. Why do you say that...what do you mean?

Family

7. What do you understand to be the strengths and weaknesses in her family? - dynamics/material/structural circumstances. - probe for examples?
8. What are your greatest anxieties about the family as a whole.?
9. Why do you say that...what do you mean by... ?

Care plan

10. What do you understand to be the care plan for this child?
11. What do you think of this strategy- what are targets for change?
12. What is your expectation of success with this care plan?
13. Why do you say that ...What do you mean by..... ?

Placement

14. What made this case suitable for the Adolescent Placement Scheme in your view?
15. Why do you say that...what do you mean by- what other resources might have been considered?
16. Do you know what preventative measures before admission to care were tried and why they failed?

Carers & match

17. How well do you know the carers? - relative to child's family-

18. What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of this carer family? -what makes them particularly suitable as specialist adolescent foster carers?
19. Explore definitions and concepts.
20. What do you think are the most important features of this placement for this child/ how do you see it fulfilling her needs?
21. Why do you say that ...what do you mean by.....?
22. What do you feel are the weaknesses of this placement, if any?
23. Why do you say that...What do you mean by.....?
24. What do you think the carers will be able to give this child that her own parent[s] cannot at the moment?
25. Why do you say that...What do you mean by..... ?
    - probe for definitions of role of carer Mum, Dad, Sibs,
    lifestyle, material circumstances, as well as emotional ingredients
26. Do you see the child's needs changing while she is in her placement?
27. Why do you say that...What do you mean by..... ?
28. What has to change in order for her to return home, and when do you expect her to return to her own home.. ?
29. Why do you say that... What do you mean by.....?
30. How confident do you feel about the match between the child and the carers?
31. Why do you say that...what do you mean by...?
32. Can you visualise this child's future - how does it look to you?
33. Why do you say that...What do you mean by.... ?

Additional work in care plan.

34. What is your expectation of the work that will be done with this family ?- probe for details, examples, objectives- which family members will be involved - targets for change
35. What is your expectation of success in this work?
36. Why do you say that...what do you mean by... ?
37. What is your expectation of other work that will be done to support the care plan?
38. What is your expectation of success in this work?
39. Why do you say that...what do you mean by ... ?

Placement and birth family.

40. What is your expectation of the support work that will be done with the carers in this placement.? (How will you be supporting the carers during this placement? - probe for details, examples, objectives- which family members will be involved?)
37. Do you envisage any difficulties arising between family and carers? (How have the carers responded to the girl's parent[s]?
38. Do you envisage any difficulties arising between family and carers?)
39. Why do you say that...what do you mean by?

<u>Schedule for semi-structured interviews with all respondents (conducted as second part of first interview)</u>

Part 2. General

1. What does the concept of 'the family' mean to you? -composition/f functions/ resources/ importance of ?
2. The family is said to be central to modern social work. Do you think it is in practice? - over/under-rated - with what consequences ?
3. What does the concept of 'care in the community' signify for you?
4. Why do you say that ...What do you mean by ...?
5. Social workers often talk of adolescents needing a 'good family experience' when they put them forward for Community Care. How would you define this? - key features?
6. Do you think the family is important to teenage boys and girls in the same ways or different ways? - key features girls/boys.
7. What do you understand by the term 'normalisation' ?
8. Why do you say that ... what do you mean by ...? - what most kids experience/ or ideals?
9. What do you understand to be Departmental Policy on placement of adolescents in care, and how do you feel about this?

10. Why do you say that ... what do you mean by ...?
11. Comparing family placement with other kinds of substitute care, what would you say are its advantages and disadvantages?
12. Why do you say that ... what do you mean by ...?
13. Are these different for girls and boys?
14. Why do you say...what do you mean by ...?
15. There are more adolescent boys received into care than adolescent girls, why do you think this is?
16. Why do you say that ... what do you mean by ...
17. Research suggests that social work has different standards for boys and girls in the assessment of their needs and the treatment of their problems. Have you found this in your own experience?
18. Why do you say that ... what do you mean by ...?
19. Do you think boys and girls have inherently different problems and needs ?
20. Why do you say that ... what do you mean by ...?
21. Do you think that your own gender influences the way you work with adolescents of the same and opposite gender?
22. Why do you say that ... what do you mean by ...?
23. Would you say that social work practice in your agency is equally good or bad for girls and boys?
24. Why do you say that ... what do you mean by ...?
25. How would you see the agency's service being improved for girls?
    Why do you say that ... what do you mean by ...?

26. Do you think your thinking about any aspect of this case has been affected in any way by this interview?

APPENDIX B3. PRE-INTERVIEW SELF-RATING QUESTIONNAIRE

Prior to their first interview, each respondent was given a sheet of the following questions and asked to circle the response that most closely represented their view. The results were collated and used in describing the sample. Ratings on questions 5 and 6 were also analysed as a register of the respondents' perspectives as Seekers, Providers and Regulators on the state and merit of the agency's policy and practice where adolescents were concerned.

Interview code:

Number years in post-qualifying practice:

Number years in current role:

1. How would you rate your own experience in work with adolescents?

Very experienced, more than average, less than average, relatively inexperienced

2. How would you rate work with adolescents relative to that with other client groups?

Very interesting, quite interesting, averagely interesting, not very interesting, boring

Very difficult, quite difficult, averagely difficult, quite straightforward,

3. Comparing work with adolescent boys and girls, do you find that girls are generally

Much easier to work with, a little easier, the same, more difficult, much more difficult

4. How familiar do you consider yourself to be with the policies, procedures and practices of your agency with respect to work with adolescents

Fully conversant with these, conversant with most, conversant with some, not very conversant with them, not at all conversant

5. How well do your own views accord with agency priorities in family placement,

I enthusiastically agree with them, I agree with them, I am undecided about them, I have strong reservations about them, I disagree with them

6. How would you rate departmental practice with adolescents

Very good, quite good, adequate, inadequate, bad, don't know

APPENDIX C1. THE SAMPLE CASES

Part.1. Data on the sample girls

The following tables display a variety of data on the girls in the study sample, their families and their care careers. The tables were compiled from information given in the AFS application forms completed for each child referred to the scheme and circulated at matching meetings, other reports that were submitted to the matching meetings, and the transcripts of interviews conducted and meetings observed in this study. Each table is followed by a short commentary.

Table 1.The Girls and Their Families

Col a = number allocated to case in study.
Col b= mother's paid occupation.
Col c = known personal details of child's natural father ('F').
Col d = number, sex, age and relationship to child of siblings.
Col f = other relatives, or members of mother's household noted in data.
Col f = Material circumstances of mother's household as noted in background reports or noted or implied in matching meetings

a	b Mother's occupation	c Known F details	d Siblings	e Other relatives/ household members	f Material circumstances
1	Unemployed	Deceased	2 older brothers (I in care, I absent	Mother lives with paternal grandparents who wish to sever contact with child.	Over crowded inner city council flat Family Income, Income Support.
2	Unemployed	Absent, nearby, no contact with children	2 older sisters	Mother's cohabitee	Council flat in new town. Family income = Income support
3	Unemployed	Absent, nearby, some contact	2 much younger step sisters who remained with child's stepfather	Stepfather recently separated from mother. Mother's cohabitee	2 bed council flat in small town to which mother has recently moved with cohabitee. Family income = Income support.
4	Unemployed	Recently absent	Younger brother	Uncle in periodic contact	Council flat in small town. Family income = income support
5.	P/T cleaner	Absent, no contact	2 older sisters 1 older brother. 1 younger brother	Grandmother in England. Step father recently separated from mother	Council flat in city housing scheme. Family Income = small wage and Income support
6	Shop assistant	Not known	2 younger half-brothers 1 younger half-sister	Grandparents close by. Mother's cohabitee	Council flat in landward housing scheme. Family income = two wages.
7	Employed	Absent, nearby, some contact	1 younger sister	Step-father	Own house on sub-urban estate. Family income = two wages
8	Employed	Absent, no contact	I younger sister I younger step-sister sister	Step-father	Rented house in mining village. Family income = two wages

Commentary

Only one of the girls was living with both natural parents when she was taken into care, and her parents separated shortly afterwards. Most of the girls were living with their mother and a step-father or mother's cohabitee and only three were recorded as having any contact with their absent father. Relations were often strained between the girl and her mother's partner and in two cases the girl had been physically assaulted by him. The mothers' relationships with their partners in the sample cases were also commonly strained and fragile. In only one case was the partnership described as of long-standing and currently stable. In addition to

case in which the child's natural father left home after she had been received into care was another case in which the child's mother and step-father of many years separated.

All the girls had siblings, three also had step- or half-siblings, and in only one case was it suggested that relationships between them were other than fundamentally close. Few extended family members were referred to in either the background papers or the transcripts, but in two cases grandparents were seen as significant to the child and, in one other, an uncle.

Where the material circumstances of the families were concerned there was also little information in the source material. It was evident, however, that Income Support was the only source of income for five of the eight families and in three families two wages provided. Only one family had a mortgage, the others all lived in council housing with overcrowding an evident problem in at least one case.

Table 2. Care Profile of Girls in Sample

Col b = Statutory basis on which child is in care (Stat), i.e. 'Vol.' = Voluntary measures under Section 15 of Social Work Scotland Act (1968); 'Comp.' = Section 44.1(a) or (b) of that act.

Col c = Number weeks spent in care this episode (weeks this epis).

Col d = Number of placement changes (plcmt chges) prior to matching, this episode.

Col e = Whether child had been in care before this episode.(Prev.Care Epis.)

Col f = Where child placed at point of matching. (Temp.foster = temporary foster care; Ch.home = childrens home)

Col g = Other agencies recently involved in case. Where the agency in the Childrens Hearing System, the most recent grounds of referral are noted in brackets as follows: BPC = Beyond Parental Control, T = Truancy, P.O.S = Place of Safety.

a	b	c	d	e	f	g
	Stat.	Wks this epis.	Plmnt Chge	Prev. care episodes	Placement at matching	Other agencies
1	Vol	21	8	Yes	Children's Home	Educational psychologist
2	Vol	25	1	Yes	Temp foster	Special education unit
3	Comp	16	0	No	Children's Home	Educational psychologist. Children's hearing (BPC)
4	Comp	45	3	Yes	Temp foster	Sexual abuse counselling Children's hearing (BPC)
5	Vol	50	0	Yes	Children's home	Children's hearing (POS, T)
6	Vol	20	0	No	Children's home	Educational psychologist
7	Vol	9	0	Yes	Children's home	NHS-medical
8	Vol	16	0	Yes	Temp foster	NHS-psychiatric

Commentary

Six of the girls were in care on a voluntary basis at the point of their registration with the AFS. Only two were subject to compulsory orders (col. b, table 2), although another girl became subject to a compulsory order while she was waiting for placement (case 5).

The duration of the sample girls' current episodes in care to the point of matching (col.c,) varied from two to twelve months. While five had had no placement change during this period (col.d), one child had experienced three changes of placement in just over a year and another an alarming eight changes in seven months. Most of the girls had been in care at least once prior to this episode (col. e) but for two of them this was their first experience of care. Five of the girls were residing in a children's home at the point of matching and three with short-term foster carers.

Information about other agencies involved with the sample cases was scarce in the source material but of those which were mentioned, educational psychologists featured in three cases and a special educational unit in one. The children's hearings had been involved with three of the girls, one of whom had also had some limited specialist sexual abuse counselling. One child had been in a hospital medical ward just prior to being received into care and another had experienced both in-patient and out-patient psychiatric care over a period of about four years prior to the care placement from which she was matched to AFS carers (col.g).

Table 3. Period spent in care by girls in sample groups prior to registration with the Scheme, between registration and matching, and total period in care before being matched to Scheme placement

Case No	No. weeks spent in care pre-registration	No. weeks on AFS register prior to matching	Total no weeks in care this episode
1	9	12	21
2	17	8	25
3	4	12	16
4	8	37	45
5	44	6	50
6	12	8	20
7	2	7	9
8	12	4	16

Commentary

There was wide variation within the sample on the periods the girls had spent in care up to the point of matching, how soon following admission they were referred to the AFS and how quickly after being registered with the scheme they were matched to placements (table 3). Where one child had only been in care for two weeks before she was registered with the AFS (col. b), another girl at the other extreme had been in care for forty-four weeks before she was registered. The alacrity with which referrals were made to the scheme seemed to have had little bearing on how long the child might wait for placement, however (col. c). The shortest time spent waiting for a placement to be matched in the sample cases was four weeks, for a girl who had been twelve weeks in care before being registered. The longest wait was thirty-seven weeks for a girl who had been in care for eight weeks prior to registration. The girl who had been in care only two weeks before registration was matched to a placement seven weeks later but other girls with relatively short periods priori to registration had at least a twelve week wait for placement.

Table 4. Reasons and objectives for AFS placement and classification (after Thoburn, 1988 and Rowe, Hundleby and Garnet, 1989))

The data for table 4 was derived primarily from the matching meeting and practitioner interview transcripts for the child's application papers were too limited in the detail they provided of the reasons and intentions for placements.

In the latter two columns of the table categories of placement are assigned derived from Thoburn's definition of types (1988, p.94-95)and Rowe et al.'s categories of specialist foster placement objectives (1989 p.101). Thoburn divides substitute care placements between those which are essentially 'parent-supplement placements', in which the objectives include the maintenance of active involvement by the family of origin and often return home for the child, and 'parent-substitute or parent alternative placements' in which the family of origin play either a minor role or none at all. Rowe et al. used nine categories of objective in their survey of foster placements, each of which is fairly self-explanatory; 'temporary care', remand/

punishment', 'treatment', 'assessment', 'preparation for long-term foster care', 'bridge to independence', 'care and upbringing', and 'other'.

	Child's age	Reasons placement necessary	Aims of placement	Thoburn category	Rowe et al. category
1	12yrs 9mo.	Child and younger brother abandoned, mother (lone parent) no longer willing/ able to care for. Current residential placement short-term only and deemed to be unsuitable.	Provide secure and stable home throughout remainder of childhood. contact with family limited and closely monitored.	Substitute	Care and upbringing and treatment
2	15yrs 8mo.	(Lone parent) Mother refuses to have child home, feels she is beyond parental control. Current foster placement only short-term. Minor learning difficulties.	Assist child with personal development towards independence. Contact with family unlimited but by arrangement.	Supplement	Bridge to independence
3	13yrs 8 mo.	Family breakdown, followed by mother (lone parent) setting up new home for self and child. Current residential care placement short-term only and deemed inappropriate for needs. Some school and emotional problems.	Six month placement to allow mother to re-settle herself and to provide child with stability meantime. Assist planned return home. Shared care with mother. Regular arranged contact.	Supplement	Temporary care
4	13yrs 11mo.	Family instability, erratic quality of care and control for children, compulsory reception into care. Parents contesting. Residential care deemed inappropriate for needs. Current AFS placement irretrievably broken down, new placement required urgently. Behaviour problems.	Indeterminate length of placement for security and stability in care and control pending more satisfactory conditions for return of child home. Management of behaviour. Parental contact closely monitored	Supplement	Care and upbringing. Treatment
5	15 yrs. 1 mo.	Mother and child requested care following school, family and personal problems. Family stresses (lone parent) and inadequate support for child and her schooling. Residential care deemed inappropriate to needs. Voluntary status of care changed to compulsory by Children's Hearing against recommendations of social worker.	Indeterminate length of placement. Provide emotional security and consistency and support for schooling. Unlimited contact for child with family.	Supplement	Care and upbringing. Possible bridge to independence
6	14 yrs.	Poor and sometimes violent relationship between child and stepfather. Child moves erratically between mother and grandparents who cannot provide full-time care. Mother requested care. School exclusion. Current residential placement short-term and deemed inappropriate for needs.	Indefinite term of placement. Provide security, stability and support for schooling. Return home unlikely due to stepfather's attitude. Contact by arrangement with mother and siblings.	Supplement	Care and upbringing.
7	13yrs 7mo.	Breakdown of relationship between child and mother. Poor relationship between stepfather and child. Mother refusing to have child home and child refusing to return home. Current residential placement deemed not to meet child's control needs.	Provide security, consistent care and firm limits on behaviour and movements to and from home. Ideally return home in due course.	Supplement	Care and upbringing, and assessment.
8	13yrs 7mo.	Child refusing to return home, parents (mother and stepfather) equivocal. Reasons for family rift unclear, but history of instability and psychiatric involvement in family. Current foster placement short-term only.	Indeterminate length of placement to allow situation at home to be further investigated and resolved. Return home ultimate goal.	Supplement	Care and upbringing, and assessment.

Part 2. Comparison between sample and full cohort of girls registered with the adolescent foster scheme (AFS) during the same year

Three cohorts were compared; all the girls on the register during the year when the sample was compiled ('All girls'), those girls which were matched and placed during the year ('Placed girls'), and the study sample of eight cases in which the girls were also matched and placed ('sample girls'). The variables selected were those on which records were kept with a sufficient degree of consistency to permit comparison between the cohorts and were indexed to the date on which each child was registered with the AFS. These variables were 'age when matched to placement', ' statutory basis of her care at the time', 'child's temporary care placement at the point of matching', 'period child had spent in care prior to registration', 'period of time between registration and placement, and the number of placement changes recorded for the child after registration.

Table 5. Age of girls registered with the AFS between November 1989 and November 1990 compared between all girls on register, girls who were placed during the period and the girls in the study sample

Age at registration	% All girls (N=106)	% Placed girls (N= 35)	% of Sample (N = 8)
under 12 years	3.7	0	0
12-13 years	6.4	14.29	12.5
13-14 years	20.2	28.5	37.5
14-15 years	35.8	40.0	37.5
15- 16 years	29.3	17.1	12.5
over 16 years	4.6	0	0
Mean age	14.36 years	14.03 years	13.87 years

Commentary

The sample girls were aged between twelve and sixteen years with the majority in the thirteen to fifteen year age group which was also the modal age-group all girls and placed girls. The mean age of the sample girls was very slightly lower by a matter of months than that of all girls and placed girls but the general age profile of the sample was commensurate with the norm for the scheme.

Table 6. Statutory Basis of care at registration compared between the three cohorts

Statutory basis of care	% All girls (N = 106)	% Placed girls (N = 35)	% Sample (N = 8)
Statutory supervision	54	45	37.5
Voluntary supervision	35	49	62.5
None recorded	11	6	0

Commentary

It appeared that more of the sample girls (62.5%) were in care under voluntary provisions than was the case for either the placed girls (49%) or all girls (35%) (Table 6) but care status could change rapidly and changes were not always notified to AFS records. There was more evident consistency between the groups in respect of their temporary placement (Table 7

below) with the majority in each group being placed in children's homes rather than some other type of placement (all girls, 49.5%; placed girls 54.6%; sample girls, 75%).

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Table 7. Accommodation at point of registrations compared between the three cohorts

Accommodation	% All girls (N = 106)	% Placed girls (N = 35)	% Sample (N = 8)
Own home	7.0	8.6	0
Foster care	36.0	28.5	12.5
Residential	49.5	54.6	75.0
Other (e.g. hospital)	2.0	2.8	12.5
No record	5.5	5.5	0

Table 8. Number months between admission to care or imposition of supervision order and registration with AFS, and between registration and placement ('Wait times') compared between cohorts

Wait times, means and ranges	All girls	Placed girls	Sample
	months	months	months
Mean wait time between reception into care and registration	6.0	6.2	4.7
Range of wait times	.5 - 144.0	1.25 - 60.0	1.25 - 18.0
Mean wait time between registration and placement	NA	2.0	2.9
Range of wait times	NA	.5 - 6.0	.5 - 3.0

Commentary

Prior to being registered with the scheme, the sample girls appear to have spent about six weeks less in care on average than the other cohorts. Once registered, however, the sample girls experienced much the same period of waiting to be matched to an AFS placement as 'placed girls in general

Table 9. Number of placement moves between registration and final placement or end of survey year compared between cohorts

	All girls	Placed girls	Sample
Mean no. placement changes	1.2	1.4	1.5
Range	0 - 6	0 - 3	0 - 8

Commentary

An attempt was made to compare placement changes between the three cohorts but this was made difficult by evident under-recording of placement changes in central records. Molly, in sample case 3, for example, was listed as having had no placement changes yet it became clear in the interview with her social worker that she had three during the current care episode. Lesley, the youngest girls in the sample group and the one for whom the two meetings 1a and 1b had been held, had experienced eight changes of placement during the current care

episode. Four of these changes occurred whilst waiting for an AFS placement but one of these was noted on the central records. Although Lesley's was an extreme case, placement instability was not at all unusual for girls in the scheme. The mean number of placement changes within the current episode to the point of matching was 1.2 for all girls registered 1.4 for all girls placed in the year and slightly higher at 1.5 for the sample group. Successful matching would lead to a further change of placement, from the temporary to the planned AFS one, and if this failed to establish there was no guarantee that the girl would return to one of the placements she had had before.

Part 3. THE GIRLS' CASE HISTORIES

The following brief case histories of each of the girls in the sample have been summarised from information given in their AFS referral forms, at their matching meetings and in the interviews with their social workers.

It was difficult to encapsulate in a short summary the complex circumstances described by social workers in relation to each individual girl's life and difficult editorial decisions had to be made. What I have sought to do is to represent the girls' stories as told by their social workers but with as little as possible of the analysis, opinion and speculation which accompanied the telling of them. In this way, I hope to have provided précis which reflect the girls' circumstances unencumbered by the constructions that were put on them within the decision-making or research interview process. I have also highlighted in these précis those particular features or issues which most distinguished the biographies one from another.

CASE 1. Lesley. 12 years 8 months old at matching
Lesley was the youngest child in the sample group. She and her fourteen-year-old brother were both taken into care when neighbours found them alone in the house without food. Their older brother had already left home. Initially brother and sister were placed separately, the boy in a children's home and Lesley with short-term foster carers because she was at the time barely twelve years old. Two months later, having exhausted the official short-term care period of six weeks and under pressure from the carer, Lesley was moved and placed with her brother in the children's home. At the same time a referral was made to the AFS.

The joint placement lasted only a month before Lesley was moved again because, the staff of the home asserted, she destabilised her brother. After a week or so in another children's home Lesley was placed with short-term foster carers in the country for the remainder of the school holidays. Travel to and from Lesley's school was virtually impossible from this placement, however, and when the new term started Lesley was moved yet again, to foster carers in the city. This placement was discontinued after eight weeks when Lesley alleged assault by the foster father. She was returned to the children's home where she remained, with the exception of one week's 'time out'1 in another unit, until she was matched to AFS carers. In all, Lesley experienced eight placement moves during her twenty-one weeks in care prior to her AFS placement matching.

Lesley's father had died when she was six years old. Since then, her mother had had a succession of cohabitees, some of them violent towards her and her children. The mother became chronically depressed and apparently disinterested in her children. She moved in with her own parents, who were hostile to Lesley and eventually refused to allow her to visit. Mother never visited the children and did not respond to the social worker's requests for a meeting. She did, however, sign the necessary forms for Lesley's referral to the AFS and a placement was being sought in the scheme which would see Lesley through her school years and hopefully beyond.

Lesley had agreed to the AFS referral and attended some of the preparation groups organised for children waiting for placements. However, she strongly resented being in care and believed that social workers were preventing her from being re-united with her family. The children's home where she was based was going through a rather unstable period and Lesley's behaviour was also unstable. She also had problems at school that had brought her to the brink of exclusion. The Educational Psychologist attached to the child's school had

considered residential school but the social worker was unclear whether or not a referral had actually been made.

Anxiety, on the part of the professionals dealing with her referral, about the detrimental effects on Lesley of remaining in the children's home was matched by an almost equal anxiety about the problems she might create for any prospective carers. She was linked to one of the most experienced carer couples in the AFS and a change of school was planned to accompany the placement. The first matching meeting for Lesley ended with a deferment to allow the social worker to clarify her education status and the carers to make direct enquiries of the children's home staff about the extent of Lesley's behavioural instability. The reconvened meeting two weeks later decided that these issues were sufficiently resolved for the placement to go ahead, and they recommended it as matched.

CASE 2. Wendy. (Age when matched; 15 years 8 months).

Wendy was the oldest girl in the sample group and was matched to AFS carers within four months of her school leaving date. Her academic prowess has been well below average throughout her secondary schooling although she was a consistent attender and her literacy skills had recently been assessed by an educational psychologist as equivalent to that of an average eight or nine year old. An AFS placement was being sought for Wendy which would help her make the transition from school to work and acquire the skills she would need to manage by herself as an adult. It was hoped that she would be persuaded to remain in the placement until she was eighteen but Wendy had already announced her intention to discharge herself from care (she was in care voluntarily) the minute she reached her sixteenth birthday.

Wendy had had no experience of being in care or even under social work supervision until she was almost fifteen, although social workers had been involved with other members of her family in the past. Her parents had separated when Wendy was about six but Wendy and her sisters continued to have fairly regular contact with their father and each had lived with him for a short period. When Wendy's older sister had left home, however, she accused her father of having sexually abused her. She elected not to involve the police but mother banned any further contact between Wendy and her father.

Some years later, Wendy's mother acquired a new partner who moved into the family home when Wendy was about fourteen and a half. Wendy had already begun to test her mother's parental authority by this stage and the unwelcome addition of this new family member only increased Wendy's recalcitrance. Mother sought help from the social work office and Wendy was received into care for a short period of respite. Wendy returned home and with social work support the situation appeared to settle down sufficiently for the case to be closed. However, two months later, Wendy's mother referred her again to social work saying that she was now beyond control. Wendy's oldest sister had come home with a serious drug problem and mother was also having problems with her cohabitee. Social workers refused to take Wendy into care again at this point and provided regular visits from a field worker instead. The acrimony at home subsequently increased to the point where the cohabitee hit Wendy and Wendy herself was staying out later and later at night. Wendy's mother presented her to the social work office demanding that she be taken into care and refusing to have her at home. Immediate reception into care was organised and Wendy was placed with short-term carers where she stayed for three months until she was matched with and introduced to an AFS placement.. Whilst with the temporary carers, Wendy had had little contact with her mother and had begun talking about her father again. She was angry with him because he had made

promises to her that he had not kept but she did not believe her sister's allegations and she missed her father deeply. In order to control contact between Wendy and her father he was kept uninformed of the whereabouts of her placements, so it was with some disquiet that her social worker first discovered at the matching meeting that the proposed carers knew Wendy's father socially. Ultimately, the meeting decided that this potential problem could be managed and that the placement should be recommended.

CASE 3. MOLLY. (Age when matched; 13 years 8 months).

Molly had first been taken into care as a small child after her parent's divorce and adoption was even considered for her at the time. However, she returned to live with her mother but when her mother re-married, Molly felt displaced and sought out her father with whom she stayed intermittently for a year or so. He finally persuaded her to return full-time to her mother, stepfather and two very young stepsiblings and it was from this home that she was received into care for the second time.

Initially, when Molly's mother and step-father asked for her to be received into care the social worker refused, offering case-work instead. The step-father's hostility to Molly and her feelings of displacement were a problem which the social worker attempted to resolve through family therapy at an out-patient psychiatric clinic and frequent social work visits to the family home.

Regular meetings took place until the social worker began a training course that took her away from the office for three months. During this period, the meetings stopped but the problems in the family continued. Molly was bringing letters about her school conduct home and the parents were becoming increasingly frustrated with them. Molly ran away from home, accepting lifts from strangers to do so, and the parents requested that she be taken into care when found. In the absence of the family's allocated social worker, this request was acceded to and a referral made to a children's hearing where a compulsory supervision order with a condition of residence in a substitute care placement was applied.

Whilst Molly was in care her parents separated, and the social worker returned to find the mother preparing to set up home with a new cohabitee. Molly's three younger stepsiblings had stayed with their father and the plan was for Molly to return to her mother as soon as it was deemed possible. Molly was to remain in care for a period to allow her mother to establish herself in her new situation and to ensure some interim stability for Molly. A referral was made to the AFS for a short-term placement of six months or less because the children's home where she was currently placed was felt to be unsuitable for her. The social worker was seeking a shared-care arrangement between the carers and Molly's mother. Molly was desperate to return home but, although she couldn't understand the reasons why she could not go home, she agreed to a foster placement as a short-term measure.

Molly was linked to experienced carers where she would be the only foster child and the only girl. Although there was some questioning at the matching meeting about why Molly was not to be returned to her mother, the consensus was that the proposed placement would suit her very well and should go ahead as soon as possible.

CASE 4. CHRISTINE. (Age when matched; 13 years 11 months).
Christine's case was the only instance in the sample in which the carers to whom she was matched in the study were reluctant to accept the placement. It was also an example of what was known in the AFS as a 're-match'. That is, a previous AFS placement had broken down and Christine had therefore been given priority over other waiting children for the next suitable and available placement. Nevertheless, it took a month to find alternative carers and a further month to complete the linking process and matching arrangements. Meanwhile Christine remained with the carers who had asked that she be removed.

Christine and her brother had been in and out of care all their lives and the local social work office had voluminous files on the family. The parents' relationship with social workers was ambivalent and at times turbulent, as, apparently, was the relationship between the couple themselves. Christine's father was an itinerant agricultural worker and casual labourer. He was often away from home for months, and at one point, years at a time. In his absence, Christine's mother, who had a minor learning disability, relied heavily on social work support and would request the children's reception into care when their behaviour became unmanageable for her. The family rowed regularly and usually called upon their social worker at such points of crisis. At the same time, both parents resented social work intervention and were as likely to fight to have their children returned as they were to have them taken into care in the first place.

It was against this background that Christine's most recent care episode began. Only a fortnight home from a previous care episode, Christine was assaulted by her father, made a complaint to the police and was received back into care on a compulsory order. The social worker made a referral to the AFS and in due course, in the face of legal action being pursued by the parents, Christine was placed with AFS carers.

The carers with whom she was placed were new to fostering and lived in a rather quiet neighbourhood. Christine's raucous behaviour with local children brought a series of complaints to the carers' door and after a few weeks the carers gave notice on the placement and asked that she be moved elsewhere. Rather than move Christine to an interim placement, the social worker decided with the agreement of the carers' liaison worker to support Christine in the disrupted placement until she could be moved directly to her new AFS placement. Experienced carers in a suitable neighbourhood were identified for her and the matching meeting arranged. In the meantime, however, the placement to which she was to be matched was used for an emergency placement of another girl because there were no other available resources. Christine's proposed carers became attached to this other child and wished to pull out of the arrangements for Christine. The professional participants in the matching meeting met beforehand and resolved that the placement had to be preserved for Christine and, notwithstanding repeated expressions of reluctance by the carer at the matching meeting, the recommendation was made that the placement was matched and should begin within the week if possible.

CASE 5. LINDA. (Age when matched; 15 years 1 month).
There had almost never been a time in Linda's or her mother's life when there had not been some contact with social workers. Linda's mother grew up in care, had her first child at the age of eighteen and this child went on to spend the majority of his childhood in care. Linda's older sisters were born four and six years after their brother, by which time their mother was

unhappily married. Linda was born four years further on and the parents then separated. All the girls spent some of their early childhood in care.

The family moved several times in England before coming to Scotland where they continued to move from area to area. Family case files were distributed between social work agencies and somewhere along the line information about Linda's father and details of her early care history were lost.

Linda's mother remarried and, shortly after Linda's stepbrother was born, her stepfather began sexually abusing her oldest sister. When this was discovered some years later, the younger girls were placed on compulsory supervision. Mother refused to live separately from her husband and so the girls were placed in the care of their grandmother in the North of England for their protection.

At about the age of thirteen-and-a-half Linda returned with her sister to live with mother. A year later Linda became pregnant with her steady boyfriend and they decided to terminate the pregnancy. During and after the pregnancy, Linda's school attendance dropped to fifty per cent. Her relationship with her mother then hit a crisis, Linda ran away from home overnight and her mother reported her to the police. Police and school referrals to the Children Hearing Reporter led to a hearing which imposed a home supervision order with a requirement for a co-ordinated assessment. Before this was completed, however, Linda, her mother and her social worker decided upon reception into care on a voluntary basis and Linda moved into the children's home where she was still residing when matched to her AFS placement.

The Hearing was recalled to discuss Linda's co-ordinated assessment report had decided to convert her home supervision order to a residential one, thereby negating the voluntary basis of her substitute care. This caused some confusion at her AFS matching meeting but did not otherwise inhibit proceedings. The social worker was seeking a placement for Linda to provide her with structure, stability and support for her education. Despite their almost routine emotional crises Linda, her mother and her sisters had strong ties of affection and Linda wished to keep regular contact with home. She also wished to remain at the same school. She had been linked to experienced carers whom the social worker believed would well meet her developmental and emotional needs but they lived at some distance from her home and school. Notwithstanding this latter obstacle the matching meeting agreed to recommend the proposed placement.

CASE 6. LAURA. (Age when matched; 14 years).

Laura's mother was only sixteen when Laura was born and she never learned who her father was. Mother and daughter lived with grandmother until Laura was six when they moved out to live with mother's cohabitee. In due course the couple had three more children and Laura felt progressively inched out of her previous closeness with her mother, although she was and remained very attached to her stepsiblings. Laura's relationship with her stepfather, however, deteriorated until she took herself back to her grandmother at the age of thirteen reporting that he hit her. Grandmother found she could not manage Laura who had taken to staying out very late and truanting from school. A series of school exclusions followed.

Laura returned home but her stepfather continued to assault her. Laura and her mother both requested Laura's reception into care and Laura maintained regular contact with her mother and stepsiblings from her placement, as far as possible avoiding contact with her step-father.

The stepfather was cautioned after one of his attacks on Laura but no further action was taken in respect of subsequent threats and assaults. The home was considered unsafe by her social worker for Laura to return to and a placement of indefinite length was sought through the AFS. Laura agreed to the referral and took part in the preparation groups for children awaiting AFS placement, but she missed her mother and siblings and yearned to return home.

The carers selected for Laura were new to the AFS and she was to be their first matched placement. They had been short-term foster parents for five years but converted to long-term placements after their last foster child whom they had agreed to keep beyond the temporary period. The female carer who attended the matching meeting expressed some hesitancy about committing herself to a potentially long term for a child whom she had never met but was reassured in discussion that she would manage the problems Laura might present and the placement was recommended.

CASE 7. MELISSA. (Age when matched; 13 years 7 months).

Melissa was received into care after admission to hospital following a Paracetamol overdose. She had refused to return home having fallen out with her mother who was also resistant to her return. Initially, Melissa was placed with family friends until a placement became available at a children's home where she remained up to her matching meeting.

Melissa's parents had separated some nine years earlier and she had had little stability in her life since then. She and her sister lived first with their father in England, then with their mother, moving with her to Scotland. Shortly afterwards, mother's cohabitee moved in with his three children and Melissa and her sister moved back to their father, who had by this time also moved to Scotland. Again the arrangement broke down, not least because of the father's alcohol problem, and the girls returned to their mother where Melissa had failed to settle in the months leading up to her reception into care.

Throughout all these domestic moves, Melissa had taken care of her sister, ensuring that she was fed, clothed and taken regularly to school. She had been less assiduous with her own school attendance, however, and, according to her social worker, resented not being older than she was and more independent than she was allowed to be.

Whilst in the children's home, Melissa had had very intermittent contact with her family and had difficulty conforming to the rules of the home. She argued continuously with staff and frequently stayed out overnight, ostensibly with her father but in fact with friends. She agreed with her social worker that she might be happier in a foster placement and a referral was made to the AFS. During the period of her participation in the preparation group Melissa became ambivalent about the prospect of an AFS placement and this was the state of mind she was reported to be in at the point of her matching meeting.

Melissa had been linked with experienced carers who were keen to involve her in their intimate and active family life that appeared to contrast so much with her own. The social worker had been unable to see Melissa to inform her about the matching meeting and it therefore took place without her knowledge. The decision that the placement was matched and should be recommended was therefore made with the caveat that Melissa herself may have other ideas.

This case was the first in the sample to be matched by child's 'local' panel. This was the same panel that had discussed her case and endorsed the referral to the AFS when it was first made. The carers lived in a different area and were therefore unknown to the matching panel.

CASE 8. CAROLE. (Age when matched; 13 years 3 months).

Carole's mother left her violent husband and the family home in England when Carole was five and her sister three years old. The girls remained with their father. Two years later mother moved to Scotland with her new partner and a year or so after that organised a clandestine retrieval of her children. Mother was awarded sole custody of her children on the basis of their father's neglect and mistreatment of them and Carole's stepsister was born shortly afterwards.

The newly constituted family spent little time together, however, for first her sister, then her mother, and then Carole herself was admitted to in-patient psychiatric care for periods of up to a month in each case. Carole's mother suffered bouts of depression and made a suicide attempt at one point but the children were admitted for observation of reported behavioural problems. Their mother felt they were unmanageable at home together and that they were suffering from emotional damage caused while they lived with their father.

In between the various in-patient episodes the family met with psychiatric staff on an outpatient basis but this apparently failed to remedy the problems they had. Carole and her sister were admitted in succession a second time and at this stage the hospital social worker formally admitted Carole to care and referred her to the AFS.

The case was then transferred to a field social worker who formally took over the case barely two weeks before Carole's scheduled AFS matching meeting. The psychiatric reports were being withheld from the case file and the social worker was thus required to discuss a potential placement without the full background information on which the referral had been based. Carole was reputed to be hostile to her stepfather, rivalrous with her sister and distant from her mother. The behavioural problems reported by the mother appeared not to be severe and the foster carer in whose care Carole had been temporarily placed reported no problems at all. Carole attended school regularly and was making friends there. The family seemed to be relatively secure financially and lived a reasonably ordered life. None of this appeared to the new social worker to amount to a case for long-term substitute care, but Carole was refusing to go home, her mother was reluctant to have her home just yet, and the process was well advanced before she became involved.

Carole had been linked to carers who were wholly new to the AFS. The matching meeting was therefore confronted with two relatively unknown quantities, the child and the proposed carers, between whom to assess degrees of potential compatibility. It was a long and deliberative meeting but it finally resolved that the placement should go ahead on an indefinite basis in order to give Carole stability in the event that further attempts at family rehabilitation should fail.

APPENDIX C2. THE SAMPLE RESOURCES

Data for the following tables was extracted from background papers provided to the matching meetings, the transcripts of interviews with practitioners and the transcripts of the matching meetings.

Table 1. Household composition, occupations and material circumstances of the carers

Event	Household	Ages	Parents occupations	Material circumstances
1	Husband Wife Daughter Son	NR NR 13 6	Residential worker and housewife	5-bed council house in mining village. Income c.£12,000 p.a. + carer fees
2	Husband Wife Son	NR NR 22	Policeman and housewife	Police house in modern housing scheme. Income c.£13,000 + carer fees
3	Husband Wife Son Son	43 36 12 10	Miner and housewife	3-bed council flat in village. Income NR + carer fees
4	Husband Wife Daughter Son	40 36 12 10	Clerical assistant and housewife/ part-time cleaner	3-bed council flat in mining village. Income NR + carer fees.
5	Husband Wife Son Son	38 37 9 6	Skilled tradesman and housewife/ part-time student	Mortgaged semi-detached house on suburban housing scheme. Income NR + carer fees.
6	Husband Wife Son Son	41 39 16 14	Warehouseman and housewife/ part-time sales assistant	Mortgaged 3-bed inner city flat. Income NR + carer fees
7	Husband Wife Son Son	44 37 13 11	Milkman and Housewife	4-bed council flat in small town. Income £8,200 p.a. + carer fees
8	Husband Wife Son Daughter	31 29 8 1	Driver and housewife/ part-time cleaner	Privately rented 4-bed house in coastal village. Income £9,000 + carer fees.

Commentary

All the carer families in the sample were headed by two parents and in only one case had a parent been married before. Most of the couples were in their late thirties or early forties and most had children of their own over twelve years of age. In none of the families were there more than two children and in five of the eight the children were all male.

Labour division between carer partners followed traditional lines with the fathers being the principle income earners, in skilled or semi-skilled trades, and the mothers being the principle home-makers, in some cases with very part-time work outside the home. This division of labour was encouraged to some extent by agency policy. This specified that only one of the carers should be in full-time employment on the grounds that the carers were "undertaking a job in their own homes for which we pay a fee" (internal agency paper on schemes of foster care). None of the carers was registered as unemployed and the fees paid for fostering children through the AFS would have increased the family income by around £4,000 per annum per child fostered.

Most carer families in the sample lived in rented accommodation in villages, small towns or suburbs; only one carer family lived in the inner city. Consistent with the general geographic distribution of carers registered with the AFS, the majority of the sample carer families lived in the landward divisions of the Lowlands agency.

Table.2. Number and Type of Placements Offered, Experience with the AFS, and Qualities of Carers

The qualities of resources were covered to some extent in the review reports made available to the study which referred to the number and type of placements provided, the fostering experience of the carers and any particular skills or competencies they had. These same categories are used in the resource descriptions set out below and the 'strengths and weaknesses' in column (e) are essentially précis of. the text in the reviews.

Col.b = number of placements ('plcmt') and sex of placed children for which carers are approved.
Col c = length of time in years carers have been working with the Adolescent Fostering Scheme.
Col d = number of placements ('Plcmts') they have experienced up to date of matching meeting.
Col e = digest of carers' experience, strengths and weaknesses paraphrased from their review reports.

a	b	c	d	e
Event	Plcmt capacity	Yrs. in AFS	Plcmts to date	Strengths and weaknesses
1	2 girls	7	7 girls	Very experienced with girls who have presented wide range of problems and demands. Adept at establishing open, constructive relationships with even most resistant children. Sensible and skilful in dealing with issues concerning boyfriends, sex, low self-esteem, limit setting and control. Competent at "getting natural parents alongside them". Male carer can be a bit over-protective and over-bearing. Female carer compensates by being more levelheaded.
2	2 girls	5	4 boys 2 girls	Described as very experienced and confident carers who have "been stretched to work with problems" presented by foster children with skill, flexibility and sense of challenge. Open style of communication and clear messages to children. Work well with natural parents. Work well with agency and write excellent reports. Male carer's role as policeman can make him over-rigid when dealing with delinquent behaviour. The family has three dogs that are popular with foster children.
3.	2 girls	6 yrs.	4 girls 1 boy	Described as caring and able to deal with "most kinds of difficult behaviour in placement". Work well with this and other agencies. Female carer is primary care giver and male carer takes most directive role in crises. Both attend carer support groups. Said to work confidently and intuitively with young people and seem able to accommodate youngsters into their home without pressurising them to conform. Foster children can relate to the male carer but the female carer is primary care giver and attends the carer support groups. Both work effectively with agency.
4	2 girls or boys	5 ys.	5 and 1 respite	Described as having "grown into their role" as carers, now working confidently and intuitively with foster children and able to "absorb" the child into their home without pressurising them to conform to family norms. Female carer is primary care giver but male carer very much involved.

Table 11 continued

5	1 girl	4 yrs.	5 girls	Described as very experienced carers who work well together. Skilled at dealing with volatile teenage girls. Caring and persistent in difficult and demanding situations. Flexible about age and sex of child placed and length of placement but approved only for a girl.
6	1 girl or boy	nil	none	Were short-term carers for 4 years and converted to AFS after last placement or boy continued beyond temporary period. Described as a couple who works closely together sharing all family chores. Personalities compliment each other. Female carer can be a bit forceful but male carer compensates by being a good listener for foster children. Tolerant and realistic and set clear limits. Good sense of humour. Open communication in household.
7	1 girl or boy	7 yrs.	6 girls 1 boy	Said to have developed a "certain style " with teenage girls and prefer longer placements. Tolerant but set clear limits. Good at relationships with natural parents. Female carer is regular attender of carer support groups. Flexible about age and sex of child placed but recommended by liaison worker and approved only for girl.
8.	1 girl	nil	none	New recruits to fostering. Couple described as having good communication between them and providing good care of their own children. Sensitive and mature. Keep 'open house' to large extended family and friends, including female carer's ex-husband and his family. Have demonstrated good understanding of adolescent behaviour and needs in training but have yet to be tested.

Commentary

Number and type of placements offered (Column b, Table 10)

The approval process for carers entering the AFS involved, among other things, their categorisation as a resource for a particular age and/or sex of foster child. In the first instance, the decision as to which category they would be placed in was based on their own preference. They were asked during recruitment to specify the age and sex of children they wished to foster and unless grounds were found in the home study, the approval meeting at the Fostering Panel, or subsequent reviews to challenge this choice it remained the specification for placement.

Most of the sample carers were approved for foster girls only, and three sets of carers were approved for two placements of girls. Two of the carer partnerships had apparently expressed a willingness to foster both sexes, but their liaison workers had felt they were more suitable for girls and had recommended this category of placement for them in her report. As was noted in the previous section, only three of the carer partnerships had daughters of their own and in one of these cases the child was still a baby. The experience most of the sample carers had of caring for girls in the age-group for which the AFS catered was gained exclusively through fostering them.

Length and nature of fostering experience (Columns c and d, Table 10)

The majority of carers in the sample had been with the AFS for upwards of four years and had fostered at least four children before being matched to the girls in this study. Some of the carers had fostered boys at some point during their career with the scheme but two carer pairs had only ever-fostered girls.

Particular skills and competencies of the carers (Column e, table10)

The contents of the carer review reports were very variable and lacunose with regard to the particular skills and capacities of the their subjects. The most consistent content of the reports was a brief report on the children the carers had fostered, the difficulties they had presented and how the carers had responded. From this, skills could be loosely inferred. The interview and meeting transcripts added very little more to this and the quality of resource specification is an issue that recurred throughout the study. The digests of carer skills and competencies set out in Column e of table 2 in appendix B2 represent a best effort at summarising the information that was available on this aspect of the resource in the source material.

The most commonly reported attributes of the sample carers were the simple fact of their extensive experience in fostering girls, their general capacity to cope with various challenges that their placements had presented, having good communication in the home and with the placing agency (i.e. Lowlands), and being both tolerant and able to set limits as necessary. Three of the carer partnerships (nos.1, 5 and 7) were described as having particular skills with girls although the nature of these skills was not specified. The female carer appeared to be the principal caregiver in all cases and the carer partners were often described as together providing a balance in their care and control of fostered children. On rare occasions negative attributes were mentioned, such as one male carer's tendency towards over-protectiveness and another's to rigidity, but overall the descriptions of the way the carers went about their fostering task were very complimentary.

APPENDIX C3. INTERVIEW SUBJECTS' RESPONSES TO THE SELF-RATING QUESTIONNAIRE.

The table below shows the ratings selected by respondents in each role group and in total for each of the seven questions put to them in the self-rating questionnaire administered prior to interview. Modal values are shown in red. The number of respondents in each of the role groups was, respectively, eleven social workers, five liaison workers and six panel chairpeople; twenty-two respondents in total.

Rating categories	**Number who rated**			
1. *How would you rate your experience in work with adolescents?*				
	Social workers (N = 11)	Liaison workers (N = 5)	Panel chairpersons (N = 6)	All respondents (N = 22)
Very	0	1	5	6
More than average	6	4	0	10
Average	4	0	1	5
Less than average	1	0	0	1
Inexperienced	0	0	0	0
2. *How interesting do you find work with adolescents relative to that with other client groups?*				
Very interesting	7	5	4	16
quite interesting	**3**	**0**	**2**	**5**
averagely interesting	**1**	**0**	**0**	**1**
not very interesting	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**
boring	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**
3. How difficult do you find work with adolescents relative to that with other clients?				
Very difficult	7	4	**1**	12
quite difficult	**3**	**2**	3	**8**
averagely difficult	**1**	**0**	**2**	**3**
quite straightforward	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**
very straightforward	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**
4. *Comparing work with adolescent boys and with adolescent girls, do you find that girls are generally...*				
Much easier to work with	0	0	0	0
A little easier to work with	2	1	2	5
The same	0	0	2	2
More difficult	8	4	2	14
Much more difficult	1	0	0	1
5. *How familiar do you consider yourself to be with Departmental policies, procedures and practice with respect to work with adolescents?*				
Fully conversant with these	0	0	1	1
Conversant with most	4	4	5	13
Conversant with some	7	1	0	8
Not very conversant with them	0	0	0	0
Not at all conversant	0	0	0	0
6. *How well do your own views accord with departmental priority on family placements*				
Enthusiastically agree	1	3	2	6
Agree	5	0	4	9
Am undecided	4	2	0	6
Have strong reservations	1	0	0	1
Disagree	0	0	0	0
7. *How would you rate general departmental practice with adolescents?*				
Very good	0	0	0	0
Quite good	3	3	3	9
Adequate	3	1	2	6
Inadequate	5	1	1	7
Bad	0	0	0	0

APPENDIX D. THE INFORMATION REQUESTED IN THE PROFORMA BACKGROUND PAPERS USED IN MATCHING

The papers distributed to participants of matching meetings in advance of the meeting consisted of,

- the form completed on the child when registering a referral with the AFS., part of which the child completes him or herself,
- the papers completed by the carers when first applying to become foster carers,
- and the most recent report on the carers prepared by the liaison workers for their annual review by fostering panels.

The lists in this appendix relate to the first two of these. List 1 sets out all the categories of information sought on the child's referral form. List 2 quotes the questions on the application form initially completed by the carers.

1. Information requested on the child's AFS referral form

The form was organised into four parts and the information requested in each part is listed below. The categories of information are numbered here for ease of reference from the chapters that refer to them. In selected cases, the number of lines provided for the answer on the referral form is also given in parenthesis.

Part A

1. Name, address and telephone number of referring agency.
2. Social worker's name.
3. Senior Social Worker's name.
4. Date form completed.
5. Name, age and address of child.
6. Statutory section under which child is in care.
7. Address of current care placement.
8. School child attends.
9. The nature of any geographical or other limitations on a possible placement.
10. The child's family structure.
11. Brief description of family events leading up to reception into care. (11 lines maximum)
12. History since young person has been in care. (9 lines maximum)

Part B. 'Profile of Young Person by social worker'

Child's name and date of birth

13. How long social worker has known child.
14. Child's appearance. (1 line)
15. Child's personality. (2 lines)
16. The current behaviour or habits a carer family might need to know about. (3 lines)
17. Whether the information in the papers has been shared with the child.
18. What the child understands about the intended placement.
19. Whether s/he is committed to the placement with an agreement about the work to be done.
20. A full comment on the social worker's relationship with the child. (2 lines)
21. What the child's attitude is to information being shared with potential carers.
22. Who the most important people are to the child currently.
23. Whether the child is able to make "attachments" to peers and/or adults.
24. Who the child's "strongest attachments" are .
25. What the current family relationships are as they affect the child.
26. What the child's family's attitude is towards the intended placement.
27. What the long term plan is for the child and the natural family as a whole. (3 lines)
28. What the plans are for contact between the child and its family during the placement.

29. Anything further that the social worker wishes to add. (4 lines)

Part C "Profile of young person by current carers"
Child's name and date of birth.
Type of current placement, address and telephone.
30. Description of unit/foster family and child's length of stay.
31. Whether the carer believes the AFS scheme is right for this child.
32. Description of child's appearance. (4 lines)
33. The initial impression the child makes. (4 lines)
34. What the child laughs at.
35. Whether the child has "irritating habits".
36. What the current carer likes about the child.
37. Description of the child's interest in dress or appearance.
38. Description of the child's particular problems of daily living - "e.g. hygiene, tidiness, time keeping, gambling, drinking, stealing".
39. Child's "attitude to e.g. food, money, chores, reprimands, touch/physical contact, etc."
40. Child's stage of sexual development.
41. Level of child's sexual awareness/activities/interests.
42. Whether the child can be described as open or withdrawn.
43. What the child's interests are.

Part D. Child's form (i.e. to be completed by the child)
1. Age
2. What do you look like?
3. What sort of person are you?
4. What do you do in your spare time?
5. What do people like about you?
6. What worries do you have?
7. What do you think is your main problem(s)?
8. What do you feel about being in care?
9. Would you like to live in a family setting? If so, what kind of family?
10. Who would you most like to keep in contact with when you are with carers?
11. Who are your friends?
12. What are the things you like?
13. What are the things you dislike?
14. What is important to you?
15. What do you feel about sharing a room?
16. Say a few things about you and school? What do you do with your pocket money?

2. The Questions in the Initial Application form completed by the carers'

The form was divided into two parts. Part I is summarised here but the questions in part II are reproduced as they actually appear on the form.

PART I. Basic information
Requests basic detail of names, dates of birth of family members, previous and current family addresses, occupations and earnings of carer couple, family GP, details of marital status, description of family accommodation and proposed sleeping arrangements for foster child, a signature to a declaration under the Boarding Out and Fostering of Children (Scotland) Regulations 1985 and the names of two referees.

PART II Assessment Form (Carers)
Individual description

a) Name
b) b) What do you look like?
c) c) What kind of personality do you have?
d) What do you do to unwind?
e) e) Who do you turn to when something is worrying you?
f) Do you have any special friends?
g) Do you have any individual hobbies or interests?

Family background
Say something about your own childhood and family. Tell us about your own upbringing, the bad as well as the good.

Education/ Work
a) What kind of education did you have?
b) Did you enjoy it?
c) Did you have further training after leaving school?
d) What is your present job?
e) What other jobs do you have?
f) Do you enjoy your work?
g) Is there any other work you would rather have done?
h) Have you any plans to change your job or move in the near future?

If you are married or living together, please fill in this section together.
a) What are the good things about your marriage?
b) What are the areas of strain and how do you cope with them?
c) How do you show your feelings for each other?
d) How do you settle disagreements?
e) Is one of you the boss?
f) What do you like about each other and what annoys you?

If you are single, please fill in this section.
a) If you have had a previous marriage, what were the good and bad things about it?
b) What are the good things about being single?
c) What are the areas of strain and how do you cope with them?
d) Do you or your children have any contact with your ex-husband/wife?

Children
a) Please tell us something about each of your children; what sort of people they are and what they like to do. Do they have any hobbies?
b) How do your children get on together?
c) Do you have any food preferences, e.g. vegetarian?
d) How would you cater for a child with different food preferences?
e) What chores do you share?
f) Do many people pop into your house - who are they?
g) What do you do at weekends and holidays?
h) What pets do you have - who looks after them?
i) Is there anything you do together - all (or some) of you - e.g. church, clubs, sports, etc? Would you expect a child or young person to join with you?
j) Do your family celebrate birthdays and special occasions? How do you do this?

Attitudes and values

a) How do you make family decisions?
b) Who deals with finances?
c) What happens about pocket money and allowances?
d) How important is it in your family to be careful with money, possessions, clothes, etc?
e) Are there any strict rules in the family?
f) Who decides on discipline?
g) What kind of punishments do you use?
h) Is privacy important to family members?

Feelings

a) What have been some of your happiest moments as a family?
b) What have been your most trying and stressful times? How have you coped?
c) You are expected to be in contact with the child/ young person's natural family. What do you see as the benefits and difficulties of this?
d) What type of young person could you cope with best or cope with least at this stage? Can you say why?

APPENDIX E. THE TOPICS OF DISCUSSION; THEIR NUMBER, INCIDENCE AND NATURE

The tables in this appendix are those from which the charts in chapter six are drawn. All percentages are rounded up or down to the nearest whole number.

The lists of the topics recognised in the data are set out in Tables 6 to 8 and are referred to in Chapter Seven

Table 1 Number and proportion of all recognised topics assigned to each of the user-related, resource-related and planning-related categories

All topics		USER-related		RESOURCE-related		PLANNING-related	
N	% all topics	*N*	% all topics	*N*	% all topics	*N*	% all topics
64	100	43	69	12	19	9	14

Table 2. Average proportions of user, resource and planning related topics compared between types of event

Type of event	No. events	Distribution of topics							
		USER		RESOURCE		PLANNING		Total	
		N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
Panel familiar with child's case only	1	*38*	77	*7*	16	*3*	7	*48*	100
Panel familiar with resource only	3	*30*	73	*6*	15	*5*	12	*41*	100
Panel familiar with both child's case and resource	4	*21*	71	*4*	13	*14*	15	*39*	100

Table 3. Proportion of all topics at each frequency level (*decimals rounded up or down to nearest whole number*)

FREQUENCY	Core		Common		Occasional	
	N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
All topics (*N=64*) , of which	31	48	*17*	27	*16*	25

Table 4. Proportion of topics in each subject group at core, common and occasional frequency levels

FREQUENCY	Core		Common		Occasional	
GROUP	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
User-related *(Total N=43)*	*24*	77	*8*	47	*11*	69
Resource-related *(Total N=12)*	*4*	13	*4*	24	*4*	25
Planning- related *(Total N = 9)*	*3*	10	*5*	29	*1*	6
	31	100	*17*	100	*16*	100

Table 5 Proportion of core, common and occasional topics within each subject group

	User-related		Resource-related		Planning-related	
Frequency	*N*	% user topics	*N*	% resource topics	*N*	% planning topics
Core	*24*	55	*4*	34	*3*	33
Common	*8*	19	*4*	33	*5*	56
Occasional	*11*	26	*4*	33	*1*	11
All frequencies	*43*	100	*12*	100	*9*	100

Table 6. Topics recognised as relating to the user in the core (red), common (blue) and occasional (green) ranges

USER (Child) -RELATED TOPICS	No. cases in which recognised
1. Family structure, history and circumstances.	8
2. Child's relationship/s with parent/s.	8
3. Family dynamics and relationships.	8
4. Problems in family.	8
5. Pattern of child's contact with own family from a prior placement.	8
6. Child's general demeanour and behaviour.	8
7. Child's behaviour at home.	8
8. Child's behaviour in care.	8
9. Child's personal attributes.	8
10. Child's care needs	8
11. Process of/ reasons for admission to care.	7
12. Child's views and preferences about placement.	7
13. Parental stance towards proposed placement or care plan.	7
14. Child's behaviour in school.	7
15. Management of child's behaviour in current placement.	7
16. Child's emotions.	7
17. Child's sexuality.	7
18. Child's relations with the opposite sex.	7
19. Child's physical appearance.	6
20. Child's relationships with siblings.	6
21. Child's relationship with her social worker.	6
22. Potential for problematic behaviour in proposed placement.	6
23. Need for clear limits.	6
24. Child's past pattern of school attendance.	6
25. Child's peer relationships.	5
26. Child's relationship with stepparent or mother's cohabitee.	5
27. Parent/s personality and/or parenting skills.	5
28. Child's self-care and personal well being.	5
29. Parent/s views on care plan/ placement	5
30. Placement moves.	4
31. Involvement of educational psychologist.	4
32. Child's educational attainment.	4
33. Child's relationship with absent father.	3
34. Child's relationships with extended family.	3
35. Child's relationship with teachers.	3
36. Child's personal interests and aspirations.	3
37. Future educational needs/opportunities.	3
38. Specific developmental needs.	3

39. Child's social activities.	3
40. Past placements.	2
41. Child's relationships with non-related females	2
42. Child's behaviour in the community.	2
43. Attractions of resource for child.	2

Table 7. Topics recognised as relating to the resource in the core (red), common (blue) and occasional (green) ranges

RESOURCE-RELATED TOPICS	No. cases in which recognised
1. Carer views on proposed placement.	8
2. Carer experience of fostering.	6
3. Distance of resource from child's normal school.	6
4. Impact of proposed placement on other children in the carer household.	6
5. Composition of carer household.	5
6. Carers' style/ regime of caring.	4
7. Carers' experience of / ability to manage children's challenging behaviour.	4
8. How individual members of carer household might react to living with referred child.	4
9. Personalities of carer family members.	3
10. Distance of resource from child's family home.	3
11. Carers' capacity to meet referred child's emotional needs.	2
12. Potentially positive impact referred child might have in carer family.	2

Table 8. Topics recognised as relating to forward planning in the core (red), common (blue) and occasional (green) ranges

PLANNING - RELATED TOPICS	No. cases in which recognised
1. Future management of child's behaviour.	8
2. Proposed contact between child and her family from prospective placement.	7
3. Future school placement.	6
4. Duration of prospective placement.	5
5. Reunification of child with own family.	4
6. Placement tasks	4
7. Social worker's role in care plans.	4
8. Role of other agencies in care plan.	4
9. Liaison worker's role in care plan.	2

APPENDIX F. ROLES AND PARTICIPATORY PATTERNS IN THE SAMPLE MEETINGS; TABLES FOR CHAPTER 8

Table 1. Number of utterances counted as substantive questions, answers or comments in each discussion

Event No.	Questions		Answers		Comments		100% utterances counted in each discussion
	N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	
1 (a &b)	*149*	31	*182*	38	*145*	31	474
2	*77*	33	*107*	45	*51*	22	235
3	*51*	33	*73*	48	*29*	19	153
4	*49*	34	*55*	38	*40*	28	144
5	*53*	42	*63*	50	*12*	8	127
6	*88*	40	*85*	39	*47*	21	220
7	*39*	30	*44*	34	*48*	36	131
8	*127*	45	*118*	42	*38*	13	283
Total	*633*	100	*727*	100	*409*	100	1769

Table 2. Number and proportion of questions put by participants in each discussion and the whole sample

	Regulators				Providers				Seekers			
Event No.	Panel chairperson		Panel members		Liaison worker		Proposed carers		Social worker		Current carer	
	N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
1	*61*	41	*62*	42	*5*	3	*15*	10	*6*	4	*0*	0
2	*41*	53	*23*	30	*3*	4	*6*	8	*3*	4	*1*	1
3	*28*	55	*14*	47	*7*	14	*0*	0	*2*	4	*0*	0
4	*22*	45	*24*	49	*2*	4	*0*	0	*1*	2	*N/A*	N/A
5	*18*	34	*32*	60	*0*	0	*2*	4	*1*	2	*0*	0
6	*56*	64	*26*	29	*0*	0	*6*	7	*0*	0	*N/A*	N/A
7	*12*	31	*21*	54	*2*	5	*4*	10	*0*	0	*N/A*	N/A
8	*83*	65	*18*	14	*20*	16	*6*	5	*0*	0	*0*	0
Whole sample	*321*	50	*220*	35	*39*	6	*39*	6	*13*	2	*1*	1

Table 3. Number and proportion of questions put by each role group in each discussion

Event No.	Regulators		Providers		Seekers		All groups	
	N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
1	*123*	83	*20*	13	*6*	4	*149*	100
2	*64*	83	*9*	12	*4*	5	*77*	100
3	*42*	82	*7*	14	*2*	4	*51*	100
4	*46*	94	*2*	4	*1*	2	*49*	100
5	*50*	94	*2*	4	*1*	2	*53*	100
6	*82*	93	*6*	7	*0*	0	*88*	100
7	*33*	85	*6*	15	*0*	0	*39*	100
8	*101*	80	*26*	20	*0*	0	*127*	100

Table 4. Proportion of answers given by each participant in each discussion and the whole sample

	Regulators				Providers				Seekers			
Event No.	Panel chairperson		Panel members		Liaison worker		Proposed carers		Social worker		Current carer	
	N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
1	*2*	1	*5*	3	*6*	3	*40*	22	*82*	45	*47*	26
2	*0*	0	*2*	2	*2*	2	*6*	6	*59*	55	*38*	59
3	*0*	0	*1*	1	*0*	0	*10*	14	*37*	51	*25*	34
4	*1*	2	*1*	2	*16*	29	*12*	22	*25*	45	*N/A*	N/A
5	*1*	2	*5*	8	*2*	3	*13*	20	*34*	54	*8*	13
6	*0*	0	*2*	2	*13*	15	*26*	31	*44*	52	*N/A*	N/A
7	*0*	0	*4*	9	*1*	2	*14*	32	*25*	57	*N/A*	N/A
8	*0*	0	*3*	3	*6*	6	*7*	6	*64*	54	*38*	32
Whole sample	*4*	0.5	*23*	3	*46*	6	*128*	17	*370*	50	*38*	5

Table 5. Number and proportion of answers given by each role group in each discussion

Event No.	Regulators		Providers		Seekers		All groups	
	N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
1	*7*	4	*46*	25	*129*	71	*182*	100
2	*2*	2	*8*	7	*97*	91	*107*	100
3	*1*	1	*10*	14	*62*	85	*73*	100
4	*2*	4	*28*	51	*25*	45	*55*	100
5	*6*	9	*15*	24	*42*	67	*63*	100
6	*2*	2	*39*	46	*44*	52	*85*	100
7	*4*	9	*15*	34	*25*	57	*44*	100
8	*3*	2	*13*	11	*102*	87	*118*	100

Table 6. Number and proportion of comments made by each participant in each discussion and the whole sample

	Regulators				Providers				Seekers			
Event No.	Panel chairperson		Panel members		Liaison worker		Proposed carers		Social worker		Current carer	
	N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
1	*29*		*39*		*13*		*30*		*16*		*18*	
2	*8*	16	*9*	18	*5*	10	*12*	23	*5*	10	*12*	23
3	*11*	38	*8*	28	*0*	0	*1*	3	*4*	14	*5*	17
4	*18*	45	*3*	8	*3*	7	*8*	20	*8*	20	*N/A*	N/A
5	*5*	37	*2*	18	*0*	0	*2*	18	*2*	18	*1*	9
6	*15*	32	*12*	25	*8*	17	*6*	13	*6*	13	*N/A*	N/A
7	*7*	15	*27*	56	*1*	2	*7*	15	*6*	12	*N/A*	N/A
8	*4*	11	*18*	47	*7*	18	*2*	5	*3*	8	*4*	11
Whole sample	*97*	24	*118*	29	*37*	9	*68*	16	*50*	12	*39*	10

Table 7. Number and proportion of comments made by each role group in each discussion

Event No.	Regulators		Providers		Seekers		All groups	
	N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
1	*68*	50	*33*	25	*34*	25	*135*	100
2	*17*	33r	*17*	33r	*17*	33r	*51*	100
3	*19*	66	*1*	3	*9*	31	*29*	100
4	*21*	23	*11*	27	*8*	20	*40*	100
5	*7*	58	*2*	17	*3*	25	*12*	100
6	*27*	57	*14*	30	*6*	13	*47*	100
7	*34*	71	*8*	17	*6*	12	*48*	100
8	*22*	58	*9*	24	*7*	18	*38*	100

Table 8. Proportions of each type of utterances across the sample by type and role group

Types of utterance	Regulators		Providers		Seekers	
	N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
Questions (N=633)	*541*	86	*78*	12	*14*	2
Answers (N=727)	*27*	4	*174*	24	*526*	72
Comments (N=409)	*215*	52	*105*	26	*89*	22
Total utterances	*783*	44	*357*	20	*629*	36

Table 9. Proportion of each role's utterances as questions, answers and comments

Role group	All Utterances		Questions		Answers		Comments	
	N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
Regulators	*783*	**100**	*541*	**69**	*27*	**4**	*215*	**27**
Providers	*78*	**100**	*78*	**22**	*174*	**49**	*105*	**29**
Seekers	*511*	**100**	*14*	**2**	*526*	**84**	*89*	**14**

Table 10. Proportion of each role groups' contributions as questions, answers, comments and interludes of listening

NB. The number of listening interludes was taken to be the same as the number of utterances because when one speaker was making an utterance, the others were more or less silent. Thus, the total number of contributions in speech or silence was the same, 1769. and the total The proportion of each type of contribution by each role group was arrived at by calculating each type of utterance as a percentage of total contributions and taking the remaining percentage as the proportion of listening interludes in which the group engaged.

Role group	Total contributions		Contributions as questions		Contributions as answers		Contributions as comments		Contributions as listening interludes	
	N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
All groups	*1769*	**100**	*633*	-	*727*	-	*409*	-		
Regulators	*1769*	**100**	*541*	**31**	*27*	**2**	*215*	**12**	*986*	**56**
Providers	*1769*	**100**	*78*	**4**	*174*	**10**	*105*	**6**	*1412*	**80**
Seekers	*1769*	**100**	*14*	**1**	*526*	**30**	*89*	**5**	*1140*	**64**